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HAMID KARZAI – PROBLEM OR SOLUTION?

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Abstract

This paper's goal is to examine the Presidency of Hamid Karzai, and draw conclusions as to how the United States should treat his Presidency. He has a long history in politics in his country and internationally. He appears fully qualified to be a successful President in Afghanistan. However, he was recently re-elected as the President of Afghanistan under a cloud of suspect circumstances. Friends and family members continue to undermine his legitimacy and the legitimacy of the Afghan government. This paper attempts to look at his qualifications, his history, and his decision record and proposes appropriate suggestions for US policies towards him and his government.

Hamid Karzai- Problem or Solution?

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is a significant obstacle to the successful building of Afghanistan. He is Afghanistan's biggest hope and at the same time, the potential reason for its failure. President Karzai has a long history in working to improve Afghanistan, and the lives of the Afghan people. However, the international media and others have linked President Karzai's friends and family to activities that prohibit the growth of Afghanistan such as corruption and the illegal drug trade. With all of President Karzai's qualifications, it is important to look at his overall history to see if we can determine if he will be able to lead Afghanistan to recovery, or if corruption and weakness will lead him to failure.

Hamid Karzai was born in a prominent Pashtun family, and he has lived through the recent struggles in Afghanistan, including the war with the Soviet Union, the Mujahideen rise to power, the Afghan Civil War, the reign of the Taliban and the post 9/11 conflict (Operation Enduring Freedom). He also has strong ties to the United States and has significant diplomatic experience.

Hamid Karzai was born the son of the Chief of the Popolzai tribe; a prominent tribe in Afghanistan, but he prefers not to talk about tribes. Nick Mills quotes the Afghan President, describing himself, "I am simply Afghan."¹ Many look at President Karzai as a good choice for the President of Afghanistan, as Amin Saikal writes, "Karzai was a moderate, progressive Kandahari Pashtun, who had joined the Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation and had briefly served as Deputy Foreign Minister in the Rabbani government."² Karzai was educated in Afghanistan, and attended secondary school in India. He speaks Pashtu, Dari, Urdu and English fluently.³ President Karzai has the educational background to be a very powerful leader of Afghanistan.

During the war with the Soviet Union, Karzai worked with the Mujahideen. He operated for the insurgency mostly out of Pakistan. He and his father worked in the Afghanistan National Liberation Front. Established by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi as a moderate political party, the ANFL attracted traditionalists and royalists like the Karzais.⁴ Karzai assisted in the struggle against the Soviet Union, mostly as an organizer and motivator; however, he did go to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets.⁵ During his time fighting the communists he worked with and against many of the current leaders on both sides of the conflict in Afghanistan today. After the fall of the communists in Afghanistan, Karzai then went on to work for the Rabbani government. When the Taliban came to power, Hamid Karzai originally supported them, due to the initial stability that they brought. He tried to broker a deal with the Taliban and the U.S. oil company UNOCAL to build an oil pipeline through the country.⁶ Later, Karzai became disillusioned with the Taliban. He blamed the group for the murder of his father. He did not agree with their extremist brand of Islam.⁷ Karzai left for the United States, but he continued to work for the freedom of Afghanistan from Taliban rule, and as a royalist, for the return of the King. President Karzai is extremely familiar with politics in Afghanistan, and is a strong proponent of the Loya Jirga. Hamid Karzai has the background credibility to lead Afghanistan today.

On September 9, 2001, opposition forces killed the popular Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in northern Afghanistan. Two days later, the attacks of 9/11 pulled the United States into Afghanistan. Many people believe that Massoud would have been the first choice for the United States to lead Afghanistan.⁸ After the fall on the Taliban, the United Nations named Hamid Karzai as the interim President in Afghanistan. Although he was not the first choice of many political leaders in the west, he was acceptable since he was a known commodity, and a moderate with ties to the west.

In sum, on the surface President Karzai seems qualified to lead Afghanistan out of its current crisis: he has the education, experience, and understanding of the country. Additionally, he knows most of the power brokers on both sides of the conflict. Originally, President Karzai was the toast of the international community and a media darling. The question of whether Hamid Karzai will be successful is not so clear-cut.

For the first seven years of his Presidency, Hamid Karzai was a favorite of the White House. Recently, he has fallen under scrutiny because of corruption, perceived weakness, and links to crime. A closer examination, in light of more recent developments, reveals severe defects in his leadership.

In 2009, widespread allegations of fraud surrounded his second campaign for President. The *New York Times* reported, "...the findings of an international audit stripped him of nearly one-third of his votes on the first round."⁹ Later his chief competition dropped out, claiming that he would not get a fair election. Recently, President Karzai has further moved his government away from a true democracy, as the president now appoints the commission on election fraud. The CBC news reported, "Afghan President Hamid Karzai has reportedly granted himself powers over a key electoral watchdog, a move likely to aggravate relations between his government and NATO allies fighting insurgents in the war-torn country."¹⁰

Allegations of corruption on the part of President Karzai's family generate high levels of concern for many people in and outside of Afghanistan. They exemplify the corruption that afflicts the whole country, which has caused his popularity to fall. The Times reports, regarding one of his brothers, "Mahmoud Karzai is one of Afghanistan's most prosperous businessmen... Mr. Karzai, though, clearly has exploited connections, both in Washington and Kabul to build his business empire."¹¹ Another brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, is even more of a problem for the

President. James Risen reported, “The White House says it believes that Ahmed Wali Karzai is involved in drug trafficking, and American officials have repeatedly warned President Karzai that his brother is a political liability.”¹² Furthermore, the media reported that Ahmed Wali Karzai, the chairman of the provincial council in Kandahar, is a key player in the theft of public and private land; which is a growing form of corruption in Afghanistan.¹³ President Karzai has talked a big game on corruption, but his actions and those of his family undermine his credibility.

Allegations of political weakness constitute a second reason to fear that President Karzai lacks the fortitude to accomplish his difficult task. Nick Mills documents Karzai’s belief that a political leader must not attempt a task without confidence in its success.¹⁴ This is a common Afghan cultural belief, but international observers claim that this merely disguises weakness in the face of the challenges involved in the rebuilding and leadership of Afghanistan. In fact, “The United States ambassador in Kabul warned his superiors here in November that President Karzai of Afghanistan ‘is not an adequate strategic partner’ and ‘continues to shun responsibility of sovereign burden.’”¹⁵ Additionally President Obama has said that, “he regards Mr. Karzai as unreliable and ineffective.”¹⁶ The leadership in Washington is upset with the lack of progress in Afghanistan, the widespread corruption, and the Afghan’s inability or lack of desire to do anything about it.

Because of his inconsistencies in war policies against the Taliban, many question President Karzai’s ability to help end the conflict. On one hand, he has made plans and significant strides in dealing with the Taliban. He has made progress in integrating the Taliban, as the USA Today reported, “... that an action plan to reintegrate low- to mid- level insurgent fighters into society and negotiate with the Taliban’s top echelon will be crafted at a springtime peace conference aimed at ending the war.”¹⁷ Furthermore, the Afghan government is expecting

1400 people to attend a “peace jirga” on the topic of re-integration of the Taliban.¹⁸ Additionally, he realizes that security and terrorism are major factors preventing the improvement in his country. He stated, “In reflecting about the war in Afghanistan today, we see tremendous success in many spheres but overshadowed by failure in one major field: that of defeating terrorism and safeguarding the security of Afghanistan, the region and the world at large.”¹⁹ Another encouraging sign is that he understands that his country's security force is inadequate; he is considering the potential for conscripted service. The associated press reported that he is looking at instituting conscription, and he wants to have an army and police force of 300,000 by 2012. He feels that this force will be able to provide security to the troubled nation.²⁰ It is encouraging to see that he understands the depth of the security problems of Afghanistan.

However, some of his recently implemented policies work against the goal of stability in Afghanistan. He recently tried to stop all night raids in Afghanistan. This is especially troubling as the Taliban has been able to conduct a majority of their operations at night. General McChrystal and the coalition softened this policy. He stated, “Despite their effectiveness and operational value, night raids come at a steep cost in terms of the perceptions of the Afghan people.”²¹ NATO, in cooperation with President Karzai placed additional restrictions on night raids, such as notifications and the makeup of the teams involved. Such measures further restrict coalition efforts and increase the potential for breaches in operational security.

President Karzai will be Afghanistan's President for the foreseeable future. The United States, and the international community, need to adopt a tougher policy with his government. There needs to be a considerable increase in diplomatic and economic pressure in order to force the President to tackle the tough and important challenges in his country, such as corruption and

drugs. The question is not if he is the right man for the job, as it is his job. The international community must ensure that he has the proper motivation to accomplish his difficult task.

In sum, on the surface, President Karzai, looks like the ideal man to lead Afghanistan in this most difficult time based on his education, his background, and his understanding of the situation. However, his actions and the actions of those around him raise grave fear that he cannot provide the necessary leadership for this tremendous job. Only time will tell, but today his actions support the prediction that President Hamid Karzai will lead Afghanistan towards failure, rather than helping it towards success.

Notes:

¹ Nick B. Mills, *Karzai: The Failing American Intervention and the Struggle for Afghanistan* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.), 27.

² Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (NY, NY: I.B. Tauris), 236.

³ Afghanistan Online, Biography: *Hamid Karzai: President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan* (Afghan Government: 2005), <http://www.afghan-web.com/bios/today/hkarzai.html>, Accessed 2/2/10.

⁴ Mills, Ibid., 53.

⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁶ Hicks, "Hamid Karzai," (NY, NY),

http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/k/hamid_Karzai/index.html, Accessed 2/9/10

⁷ Mills, Ibid., 110.

⁸ Saikal, Ibid., 229.

⁹ Hicks, Ibid., Accessed 2/9/10

¹⁰ CBC News, "Karzai Moves to Control Election Watchdog," (CBC News),

<http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2010/02/23/nato-afghanistan-troops.html?ref=rss>, Accessed 3/7/10

¹¹ James Risen, "Another Karzai Forges Afghan Business Empire," (NY, NY: The New York Times),

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/05/world/asia/05karzai.html>, Accessed 2/4/10

¹² James Risen, "Reports Link Karzai's Brother to Afghanistan Heroin Trade," (NY, NY: The New York Times),

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/world/asia/05afghan.html>, Accessed 2/5/10.

¹³ Tom Bowman, "Karzai's Brother Tied To Corrupt Afghan Land Deals" (Southern California Public Radio)

2/1/10, <http://www.scpr.org/news/2010/02/01/karzais-brother-tied-to-corrupt-afghan-land-deals/> Accessed 2/7/10.

¹⁴ Mills, Ibid.

¹⁵ Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Envoy's Cables Show Worries on Afghan Plans," (NY, NY: The New York Times),

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/26/world/asia/26strategy.html>. Accessed 2/9/10.

¹⁶ Tyler Hicks, Ibid., Accessed 2/9/10.

¹⁷ Associated Press, "Afghan Leader Announces Peace Summit as Gates Visits" (New York: USA Today),

http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-03-08-gates-afghanistan_N.htm, Accessed 3/8/2010.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ CNN.com, "Karzai wants Afghanistan security handover to begin this year." *CNN.com*, 7 February 2010,

<http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/02/07/afghanistan.security/index.html> (CNN international)

²⁰ Associated Press, “Karzai considers conscription to beef up Afghanistan’s Army.” GoErie.com, 8 February 2010, <http://www.goerie.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100208/News07/302089967/-1/ETN>. Accessed 2/9/10.

²¹ Tini Tran, “NATO details its Afghan night raids policy,” Philly.com, 6 March 2010. http://www.philly.com/philly/wires/ap/news/world/20100306_ap_natodetailsitafghannightraidspolicy. Accessed 3/8/10.

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