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Obama's Afghan Arm-Twisting: Weakening Karzai to give him Strength?

Clint Lorimore and Ryan Clarke

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The Obama administration's public criticism of Afghan President Hamid Karzai in recent weeks has sparked a great deal of speculation that it is looking to back an alternative candidate in Afghanistan's upcoming elections. However this move may be part of a diplomatic strategy to both spur Karzai into making uncomfortable political changes while simultaneously giving him the distance to re-generate his image.

MEMBERS OF the Obama administration have recently pelted President Hamid Karzai with a series of very public diplomatic barbs, sparking a great deal of speculation that the Obama team is looking to back an alternative candidate in the upcoming Afghan national elections. This barrage has communicated to President Karzai the Obama administration's dissatisfaction with his rule in Afghanistan, specifically regarding the issues of corruption, the country's flourishing drug trade, and the inability of his government to deliver services. These shortcomings have led many to refer to Karzai as the "Mayor of Kabul".

The media blitz on Karzai was described by one newspaper as "a series of well-placed leaks" and included President Obama's description of Karzai as "unreliable and ineffective". Vice President Joe Biden has followed a similar tact referring to President Karzai as both "weak and ineffective". Meanwhile, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has gone so far as to describe Karzai as "presiding over a narco-state". Although these apparently choreographed snubs are hardly new tactics in American diplomacy, the present timing is interesting.

The technique of orchestrating leaks to the media has served the United States well in past negotiations, including the Dayton Peace Accords on Bosnia. David Halberstam in his book about the conflict in Bosnia wrote that Richard Holbrooke, who led the Dayton negotiations, "understood that the diplomat who leaked most artfully and used his press corps as a kind of Greek chorus tended to win out". Now, it appears plausible that a more refined version of these tactics may be used to overcome a major impediment to NATO efforts in Afghanistan: Karzai's falling approval ratings.

Addressing Karzai's Falling Ratings

As early as the beginning of 2007 American diplomats had voiced their concerns about Karzai's unpopularity in Afghanistan being an impediment to NATO efforts in the country. At a conference in Brussels then, Holbrooke, Obama's new envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, stated: "I can sense a tremendous deterioration in the standing of the government. Afghans are now universally talking about their disappointment with Karzai. Let's be honest with ourselves ... the government must succeed or else the Taliban will gain from it." Unfortunately for NATO efforts, Karzai's popularity has continued to decline in Afghanistan.

His popularity stands at an all-time low for his presidency, even amongst his fellow Pashtuns, as Afghanistan approaches its national elections which are scheduled for late August this year. Many have speculated that if elections were held today Karzai would not win, though others dispute this claim on the grounds that he still holds enough sway through tribal connections, especially in the south. Nonetheless, this raises the question of who would replace Karzai. While there have been a number of names circulated in the press, from the perspective of the US and NATO, these individuals are unknown quantities, thus suggesting that it is better to work with an established figure like Karzai in an already-unstable security setting.

It should also be noted that Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's former finance minister and potential presidential candidate, while not tainted by corruption allegations like many others, is viewed by many as being out of touch with Afghans (and Pashtuns in particular) due to his long periods of residence overseas. This is something that is often used to explain his only brief stint in the Afghan government. In a country where many Pashtuns feel disenfranchised and left out of the "New Afghanistan", the ability to level with the Pashtuns is an indispensable quality of any Afghan leader.

It is likely Holbrooke has concluded that it is necessary to address the issues underlying Karzai's unpopularity. This means tackling such issues as corruption in his government which stems from the growing drug trade in the country and the fact that Karzai is considered by many Afghans as being propped up by Washington. If he is going to win in the upcoming elections, it is imperative that Karzai overcomes these issues and, whether by design or not, the recent criticism from the Obama administration facilitates exactly that.

Pressuring the Pashtun President

The Obama administration seeks to accomplish two objectives. First, by criticising Karzai publicly the Obama administration has sought to throw the Afghan president off balance, shocking him out of the complacency that has developed as an outgrowth of his close relationship with the Bush administration. While addressing the issues of drugs and corruption in Afghanistan may be politically uncomfortable for Karzai, the Obama administration is betting on the fact that he will find the prospect of being out of favour with the US government and possibly out of power to be less attractive than the alternative pain associated with addressing these difficult issues.

Second, President Karzai's unpopularity is at least partially attributable to the fact that, both within and outside Afghanistan, he is often viewed as a puppet of the US government. This is a criticism that the Afghan Taliban, who are themselves becoming increasingly grassroots and locally-focused, have been quick to capitalise on. In a recent interview Karzai was quoted as saying: "If I am called a puppet because we are grateful to America, then let that be my nickname." However, being labeled a puppet is not something that Karzai should have conceded to so easily.

By being closely associated with the US, there are questions raised as to whether he can effectively represent the interests of Afghanistan and the Pashtuns in particular. Nonetheless, by the Obama administration publicly distancing itself from Karzai, it has provided the space necessary for him to

voice Afghan grievances without having to worry about further alienating the US which has now placed him at arm's length. However, while waiting to see if Karzai is willing or able to maximise this opportunity, the Obama administration is likely to pursue a hedging strategy by maintaining relationships with other potential candidates.

Limitations of Hedging Strategy

If this interpretation of recent events is accurate, it must be noted that this hedging approach has its limitations. While it may put more pressure on Karzai to crack down on corruption and make other difficult decisions, it will not push him to take actions which he feels are suicidal. For example, by launching an all-out offensive against narcotics without a parallel development programme, Karzai risks inflaming the Taliban insurgency, losing the support of key local leaders, and possibly even endangering his family and the larger Popalzai clan, most of which hail from around Kandahar. If put in this situation, Karzai will likely choose to be remembered as the president who was pushed out by the Americans, rather than enact the changes sought by the Obama administration.

Clinton Lorimore is an Associate Research Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Nanyang Technological University where he is attached to the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS). Prior to this appointment he was a Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholar to Singapore and has also served as Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's Deputy District Director for California's two largest counties. Ryan Clarke is Associate Research Fellow at RSIS and a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre of International Studies at the University of Cambridge. He has previously resided and conducted research in South Asia and also worked at the Royal United Services Institute in London.