

By Jean MacKenzie
and Abaceen Nasimi in Kabul

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OBAMA BAD NEWS FOR KARZAI?

New US leader has been openly critical of the Afghan president, with many locals believing he may be on his way out.

There is little doubt that most Afghans are eagerly awaiting the arrival of Barack Obama on the scene. The young president's charm and charisma, combined with his Islamic-sounding middle name, Hussein, have given people in this war-ravaged land hope that, finally, there will be an occupant in the White House who can understand them and their problems.

But there is one very prominent Afghan who does not appear to be enjoying the transition: President Hamed Karzai.

As Washington braces for the festivities and the world erupts in Obamania, Karzai has been heaping very public criticism on his erstwhile backers.

In his yearly address to parliament on Tuesday, January 20, Karzai reiterated his complaints about the US's conduct of counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan. He railed about civilian casualties, and told the lawmakers that he had tried several times to rein in the US military, but to no avail.

Also, the president appears to have been stung by critical remarks made by Secretary of State designate Hillary Clinton, who told the Senate confirmation hearings that Afghanistan was a "narco-state plagued by limited capacity and widespread corruption".

According to a local newspaper, Arman-e-Milli, Karzai addressed a cabinet meeting on Monday, January 19, in angry, bitter tones, saying he would "stand against the United States until the end".

Obama himself has been openly critical of the Afghan president since the summer, when he told CNN that Karzai's government "had not gotten out of the bunker and helped organise Afghanistan and [the] government, the judiciary, police forces, in ways that would give people confidence".

In light of this, many Afghans are expecting that Karzai may be on his way out. With presidential elections looming later this year, there is talk that a new face may soon occupy the top post in Kabul.

"I think the first change that Afghanistan will see is a change in the president. Obama has some problems with Karzai, I think," said Feraidoon, a civil servant in Herat.

He, like others, cited Obama's July visit to Afghanistan, when he met with Nangahar governor Gul Agha Sherzai before he visited the Afghan president.

Sherzai has been widely praised for his stewardship of the eastern Afghan province, which has gone from a major producer of opium poppy to a certified poppy-free zone under his tenure. But the former warlord has a reputation for ruthlessness that makes some Afghans uneasy.

A rumour circulated widely in the Afghan capital earlier in the week claimed that Obama had snubbed Karzai by inviting Sherzai to his inauguration.

"It is a total lie that [Sherzai] has been invited to the inauguration," said Siyamak Herawi, deputy spokesperson of the presidential administration, in what was obviously not his first interview on the subject.

"Actually, from the Afghan side, nobody has been invited to the inauguration ceremony. It is not the tradition to invite foreign officials to the inauguration; only the diplomats. It is probable that Sayed Tayeb Jawad (the Afghan ambassador to Washington) will attend."

Karzai enjoyed strong support from Washington for most of the past seven years. It is no secret that he was hand-picked by Zalmay Khalilzad, who at the time was special envoy to Afghanistan, to be the interim president in 2002. But over the past six months, that support has seemed to waver. With the emergence of Barack Obama, it could collapse altogether.

While Afghanistan has a democratic system of presidential elections, many Afghans feel that the US will play more than a tangential role in the selection of their new chief executive.

Backing from Washington translates into money and power, in the minds of ordinary Afghans. If Washington abandons Karzai, the voters may very well follow suit.

Over the past seven years, Afghans have seen their security deteriorate, and the economy has failed to live up to expectations. Unemployment is high, and the insurgency is gaining ground.

On Saturday, January 17, a suicide bomber rammed a car packed with explosives into a truck between the German embassy and a US military compound, killing five, including one American soldier. Over 20 people were injured. The Taliban have claimed responsibility, and have threatened more attacks.

The Taliban, in fact, seem to have jumped on Obama's bandwagon as well; an open letter purported to be from the insurgents urges the new president to accept Islam.

"You are the first black in US history to establish control of the White House; you should make one more addition to the history books by becoming the first president to accept the truth and adopt the true faith of Islam," the letter reads.

The authors also warn of retribution if Obama proceeds with his plan to send additional troops to Afghanistan.

“It is impossible that Afghanistan will be subdued by your decision to send more troops. Do not take wrong steps like [President George] Bush. Otherwise the results will be similar... the flames of this fire will blow up in Washington.”

Jean MacKenzie is IWPR’s Afghanistan programme director. Abaceen Nasimi is IWPR’s project manager.