

Washington's man to be installed as Afghan prime minister

Peter Symonds
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The new Afghan interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai is due to be sworn into office in Kabul today. While UN officials are withholding details of the two-hour ceremony for security reasons, it promises to be a low-key affair. To be held in the Interior Ministry auditorium, it will be attended by the 30-member cabinet, UN Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, US special envoy James Dobbins and a handful of other UN officials and diplomats, including the foreign ministers of Iran and Pakistan.

While neither US President Bush nor any senior member of his administration will preside, the entire affair bears an unmistakable American imprint. The new regime was cobbled together at a UN-sponsored meeting of Afghani factions in Germany in early December. The UN Security Council had already set out a detailed framework—all that was left for the Afghani groups was to haggle over positions.

But, as several reports last week indicated, even the selection of personnel was the subject of pressure and bullying, from Washington in particular. According to an article in the *New York Times* last weekend, “The new government’s first challenge is to be not perceived as a lackey of America.” As the newspaper goes on to explain, there is good reason why Karzai and his ministers should be seen as US puppets.

“A Western diplomat confirmed this week that delegates in Bonn chose a different leader, Abdul Sattar Sirat, to head the interim government. Pressure from American and United Nations officials resulted in the naming of Mr Karzai and the selection of ministerial positions. ‘The result is that a lot of people feel that Karzai is a US imposition,’ the diplomat said. ‘Depending on how he plays his cards, that could be a problem.’”

An American diplomat, who attended the Bonn talks, attempted to rebut the claim, pointing out that others also regarded Karzai favourably. But he did not deny the allegation that Washington had overruled the choice of Sirat, nor Karzai’s close links to the US, going back to the 1980s. Karzai ran the office of Sebghatullah Mojadeddi, the leader of one of the US-backed Mujaheddin groups fighting the pro-

Soviet regime, and undoubtedly liaised with CIA and other US officials.

Several of Karzai’s brothers and a sister run restaurant businesses in the US and have in the past provided funds for his political activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Qayum Karzai, who has a master’s degree in political science, has decided to leave his restaurants to return to Afghanistan to “unofficially” advise his brother on “the nuts and bolts” of running a government. As one US newspaper noted, Qayum “is familiar with Washington’s diplomatic and legislative circles after years of pleading for American notice for the Afghan cause”.

Karzai is a Pashtun tribal leader, head of the Popalzai clan of the Durrani tribe, and a close supporter of the exiled Afghani king Zahir Shah. He made a special point of visiting the monarch in Rome this week for lengthy discussions before his installation as interim prime minister. Karzai also met with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who has offered to send Italian troops as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and promised to help build a private TV station in Afghanistan.

Even before his formal installation, Karzai has clearly demonstrated that he will fall into line with US wishes. At the time of the Bonn conference, he was in southern Afghanistan using his tribal ties to negotiate the surrender of Kandahar. Part of the deal was an amnesty for Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, if he promised to renounce terrorism. But the offer brought a swift rebuke from US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who warned: “To the extent that our goals are frustrated and opposed, we would prefer to work with other people.” Karzai abruptly changed his tune.

The incident raises another aspect of Karzai’s political career. Like other Pashtun leaders, he supported the Taliban, when the movement first emerged in 1994, as a means of challenging the government headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik. Karzai had served as deputy foreign minister in Rabbani’s administration but resigned when it became evident that the Mojadeddi faction had no

political clout.

As late as September 2000, Karzai told the *Atlantic Monthly*: “The Taliban were good, honest people. They were connected to the *madrassas* [Islamic schools] in Quetta and Peshawar, and were my friends from the *jihad* against the Soviets. They came to me in May 1994, saying, ‘Hamid, we must do something about the situation in Kandahar. It is unbearable.’ I had no reservations about helping them. I had a lot of money and weapons left over from the *jihad*. I also helped them with political legitimacy.”

Karzai claimed in the interview to have had his doubts about the Taliban as early as September 1994 when “the hidden hand of Pakistani intelligence” became obvious. But his close relationship with the Taliban continued for a number of years. He met with Mullah Omar on a number of occasions and in 1996 was offered the post of the Taliban’s UN representative, which he politely declined.

It may appear odd that the US should chose someone with close links to the Taliban as their puppet in Kabul. But the paradox is more apparent than real. In the mid-1990s, Washington tacitly supported the Taliban, which was heavily backed, financially and militarily, by two close US allies—Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The US has always officially rejected allegations that it provided direct support to the Taliban but the involvement of Karzai in providing money and arms to Omar and his followers once again raises the question. He told author Ahmed Rashid: “I gave the Taliban \$US50,000 to help run their movement and then handed over to them a large cache of weapons I had hidden away.”

The US only openly turned on the Taliban in 1998 after the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, allegedly by Osama bin Laden, and the collapse of plans by US oil giant Unocal to build a gas pipeline through southern Afghanistan from Turkmenistan. Karzai broke with the Taliban leadership at the same time and began to organise against them. He and his brothers blame the assassination of their father, Abdul Ahad Karzai, on the Taliban.

Rumsfeld met with Karzai and other Afghan leaders last weekend during a brief stopover in Afghanistan. He bluntly reinforced US opposition to any dealings with the top Taliban leaders, warning: “To the extent that we find that people who aspire to high office or high position in Afghanistan have been involved in preventing us from getting our hands on people who are responsible for what’s gone on in Afghanistan [they] will find the United States not terribly friendly to their aspirations.”

The Karzai administration to be inaugurated today is to hold office for six months while a *loya jirga* or tribal assembly is convened to select a transitional administration. Some two and a half years down the track, according to the

UN blueprint, Afghanistan will have a new constitution and national elections. There are already signs, however, that the new regime, patched together from rival ethnic, tribal and religious groups and militia, will be highly unstable.

Former president Rabbani is due to speak at the inauguration today. In the course of the Bonn meeting, Rabbani was pushed aside by other Northern Alliance figures who took the key ministerial posts of defence, foreign affairs and interior. Just last week he lashed out at the Bonn agreement, describing it as a “humiliation of the nation,” and accused foreign powers of imposing an unrepresentative government on Afghanistan.

Also present will be about 80 British marines, who will be “assisting” in security arrangements for the ceremony. They are the advance guard of the British-led ISAF of between 3,000 and 5,000 troops, which will be based in Kabul. The mandate for the troops was only agreed at the UN Security Council on Thursday after sharp divisions opened up between the US and Europe over its command structure.

The ISAF is crucial for Karzai, who has no significant militia of his own and faced the prospect of ruling from a capital controlled by rival Northern Alliance troops. The establishment of an international military force in Kabul has been strongly resisted by Northern Alliance militia commander Mohammad Fahim, who will become the new defence minister. He has insisted that Afghans can take care of their own security and called for any “peace-keeping force” to be limited to less than 1,000 soldiers.

The US is no doubt aware that there is very little holding together the new Afghan administration—other than the threats and financial bribes of the major powers. That is why, in a highly unstable situation, Washington made sure that its man holds the top job in the regime.



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