Washington in conflict with Afghan president over early poll

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Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai issued a decree over the weekend ordering that presidential elections take place 30 to 60 days before his term of office expires on May 21. In the midst of a deteriorating security situation and escalating war, the decision has been met with open opposition from the Obama administration and further exposed the rift that exists between the White House and the US client state in Kabul.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reportedly called Karzai immediately to condemn his actions. His decree over-ruled the country's electoral commission, which, on US advice, had delayed the vote until August 20. The delay was justified on the grounds that Obama's deployment of thousands of additional American troops over the coming months would enable the ballot to take place in areas currently controlled by the Taliban and other anti-occupation insurgents.

The commission's decision, however, was in breach of the Afghan constitution and called into question Karzai's status during the period from May 21 to August 20. His main opponents in the Afghan parliament have argued in recent weeks that Karzai should step aside and allow a caretaker government to be formed. One name suggested for caretaker president was former US official Zalmay Khalilzad, who was born in Afghanistan. Khalilzad was the Bush administration's ambassador to Afghanistan, then Iraq and the UN.

Karzai has preempted any attempt to sideline him by calling early elections. A participant for over 30 years in the Machiavellian intrigues of US imperialism in the region, Karzai is aware that such a manoeuvre could be used as an excuse to remove him permanently. By retaining the presidency during the election, he calculates on using the resources of the state to promote his re-election.

Karzai is undoubtedly under US pressure to reverse his decree. Whether he does so or not, his political days are numbered. Not only has Karzai provoked the ire of American officials and commanders by condemning US air strikes and other operations that have resulted in the deaths of Afghan civilians, his government is dysfunctional.

The Obama administration has not hidden its desire to dispense with the Bush administration's pretense of establishing "democracy" in Afghanistan. Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently ridiculed the previous propaganda, declaring before Congress that "if we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of Central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose".

The stance of the Obama White House is driven by a pragmatic assessment of US strategic interests in Afghanistan and the broader region. Despite more than seven years of US occupation, millions of Afghans do not accept the legitimacy of the Karzai government, which has only been kept in power by the presence of foreign armies. The Taliban and other insurgent groups control large swathes of territory, particularly in the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces, and are waging a continuous guerrilla war.

American and NATO casualties are rising sharply. In January and February, 48 foreign soldiers lost their lives, more than double the number killed in the first two months of 2008. Afghan security forces are suffering far greater losses. Some 1,200 police were killed last year.

Karzai's government and the US-created Afghan security forces are demoralised and riddled with corruption. Bribery, extortion and outright theft are rampant. Senior officials, including Karzai's brother,

are accused of taking part in the drug trade. The main priority of current Afghan officials appears to be to accumulate as much wealth as possible before being forced to flee by a resurgent Taliban.

Desperate to prevent a defeat in Afghanistan that would set back US interests in Central Asia, Obama and his officials now speak of "attainable" objectives rather than democracy. While deploying 17,000 additional troops to intensify the war, the administration is also holding out the possibility that it would incorporate elements of the anti-US insurgency into the Afghan government.

General David Petraeus—who directed a series of deals with elements of the Iraqi insurgency during 2007 and is now the commander of US forces in Central Asia—has said that the US will seek negotiations with factions of the Taliban and was prepared to make deals.

Al Jazeera reported last week that US and British officials are already talking with the Hezb-e-Islami movement led by Pashtun warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar received US funding to fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Following the Soviet withdrawal, he waged a murderous civil war against other factions, seized control of Kabul and established himself as the country's prime minister. The Taliban drove him from power in 1996. In 2002, however, after being denied a place in the US puppet government, he called on his followers to take up arms alongside the Taliban against the occupation.

If Hekmatyar and elements of Taliban could be bought off, it would have a significant impact on the intensity of the armed anti-US resistance, particularly in the eastern provinces of the country and some of the tribal agencies of Pakistan. Such a deal, however, would require a realignment of factional arrangements in Kabul that would almost inevitably be at the expense of Karzai, who has no significant power base of his own and was simply a convenient front man for the US puppet regime.

If Karzai does not go willingly then other methods might be used. An indication of the discussion taking place within the White House was revealed in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial of February 17. After noting the sharp tension between Washington and Karzai, the newspaper cautioned: "Mr Obama and Vice President Joe Biden—who stormed out of a meeting with Mr Karzai last year—need to avoid JFK's mistake of toppling South Vietnam ally Ngo Dinh Diem."

The meaning is clear. The Kennedy administration had no compunction about authorising the ousting of the loyal US puppet Diem in 1963 when he became a political obstacle to American plans in Vietnam. The *Wall Street Journal* has no objection to such methods, but is offering some advice that such a move, if it is being contemplated, could easily rebound on the US and the Obama administration.