

Karzai inaugurated amid state of siege in Kabul

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Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai was inaugurated Thursday amid a state of siege in Kabul. Not a single Western head of state was present. Those Western officials who were there, such as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, issued hypocritical demands that Karzai fight corruption. The Afghan president dutifully incorporated acceptance of these demands into his speech, which he read out in monotone to an audience of approximately 800.

Attending the ceremony were Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, the sole head of state in the audience, as well as British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner.

The deterioration of the US-led occupation's grip on the country was evident in the extraordinary security blanket that covered the proceedings.

"Kabul's streets were deserted early on Thursday, with armored vehicles blocking off major roads," reported the Pakistani daily *Dawn*. "Security officers were even stopping people from walking on the streets."

Kabul's international airport was closed to regular flights, and civilian traffic was banned on the road connecting it to the city. Officials flying in for the ceremony were ferried into Kabul in heavily armed convoys, while combat troops stood every 100 meters along the road.

The government declared a national holiday to keep people from going to work. Television announcements told Afghan citizens to stay inside their homes. Even most reporters were locked out of the inauguration.

Karzai's inauguration to a second five-year term comes as a result of last August's presidential election, which was characterized by wholesale ballot-stuffing. A United Nations watchdog panel determined that fully a third of Karzai's votes were fraudulent.

Washington and the other Western powers pressured the Afghan president into accepting a run-off with his principal rival, Abdullah Abdullah, as the only means of lending the election "legitimacy." However, after Abdullah refused to participate in a second round that promised to be as rigged as the first, Washington and its allies swiftly accepted as legitimate the naming of Karzai's as the winner by his handpicked election board.

The inauguration seemed to play out in much the same fashion, with Secretary of State Clinton arriving in Kabul Wednesday night after having delivered stern warnings that Washington would cut

off non-military aid unless Karzai shaped up and purged corruption from his regime.

"They have done some work on that, but in our view, not nearly enough to demonstrate a seriousness of purpose to tackle corruption," she told reporters accompanying her on the flight from Beijing to Kabul. "We are concerned about corruption. We obviously think it has an impact on the quality and capacity of governance."

After arriving in Kabul, Clinton held a 90-minute meeting with Karzai, presumably dictating portions of his inauguration speech.

Having heard the puppet president drone through his remarks, Clinton praised Karzai for delivering a "visionary outline" of his plans for his next term in office, hailing them as an "agenda for change."

The sections of Karzai's speech that Clinton, echoed by the US media, found most appealing consisted of his promise to combat corruption and his assertion that Afghanistan's own military and police would be "capable of taking the lead in ensuring security and stability across the country" by the end of his five-year term.

There is more than ample room for skepticism on both scores.

As Aryn Baker of *Time* magazine reported from Kabul, flanking Karzai as he was sworn in were his vice presidents, Mohammad Qasim Fahim and Karim Khalili. "Both have been accused by Afghan civil society groups of egregious human rights abuses, and one has been closely linked to Afghanistan's multi-billion-dollar drug trade," Baker noted.

Prominent among those viewing the ceremony was a key Karzai supporter, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the former warlord who organized the massacre of thousands of Taliban prisoners in the wake of the US invasion in 2001. The Obama White House has reportedly asked for an investigation into these war crimes, but has been less enthusiastic about probing the role of the CIA and the US military, which collaborated with Dostum in these mass killings.

"Even if Karzai is committed to cracking down on corruption and strengthening rule of law, he will have a hard time sidelining the allies that helped him get re-elected," Baker wrote.

On the eve of the inauguration, it was revealed that Karzai's minister of mines, Mohammad Ibrahim Adel, took a \$30 million bribe in return for awarding a Chinese firm a \$2.9 billion contract to exploit Afghan copper deposits. It is the largest development project initiated under the regime.

Not only Karzai, but Washington too would have a hard time

maintaining an Afghan puppet regime and a US-backed army and police force without the collaboration of such criminal elements. Among the more infamous characters around Karzai is his own brother, Ahmed Wali, who is known as the godfather of Kandahar for his reputed role in the drug trade there. As the *New York Times* revealed last month, he is also the key asset of the US Central Intelligence Agency in the region and has been placed on the CIA payroll.

In an interview with an Afghan radio station at the US Embassy in Kabul, Clinton signaled that Washington was flexible about dealing with such elements.

Asked by the Afghan reporter whether the Obama administration would continue to support the Karzai regime if there were “a wide infusion of warlords in the new cabinet,” Clinton replied, “Well, there are warlords and there are warlords.”

She acknowledged that “there are people who had very serious breaches of human rights and mistreatment of people during war”—presumably referring to men like Dostum—but added that such crimes are “always difficult to look back on and figure out how to judge.”

As for the call for Afghan security forces to take over combat operations from the US-led occupation forces within five years, this merely echoes the rosy scenarios put forward by military commanders and politicians who support the war’s escalation.

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Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the senior US commander in Afghanistan, has called for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to be built up to 400,000 by 2014. Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, gave the same five-year target in recent statements. Likewise, the head of the British Army, Sir David Richards, cited 2014 as the year in which Afghan forces could take over from the British in Helmand province, permitting London to begin withdrawing its 9,000 troops.

According to official estimates, the Afghan National Army now consists of 94,000 troops, though the real number is probably 50 percent of that. Barely half of those are considered “combat ready.”

The US military acknowledges a 20 percent desertion rate, and what forces do exist are notorious for robbing and brutalizing the Afghan people. The police are, if anything, even worse. The conception that swelling the ranks of such forces to 400,000 to defend a corrupt and illegitimate government will somehow stabilize Afghanistan borders on lunacy.

Karzai included a brief note of defiance in his inaugural address, criticizing the US-led occupation for its continued detention of Afghan citizens without charges and for the killing of civilians. He also pointed to US and other international contractors who have profited handsomely by soaking up the lion’s share of the tens of billions of dollars in civilian aid that Washington has allocated for the country, leaving next to nothing for the impoverished Afghan people.

These remarks were ignored almost without exception in the Western media. This was a logical reaction given that they were intended for domestic consumption, part of an attempt to appear as

something other than a powerless puppet of Washington.

The remarks on battling corruption and building up the Afghan security forces were scripted from Washington and directed at another audience, principally the people of the United States, Britain and the rest of Europe who oppose the war in ever growing majorities.

The claims about improved governance and the rapid emergence of a capable Afghan army are designed to prepare public opinion for President Barack Obama anticipated announcement of another major escalation of the war.

Citing unnamed administration officials, the *New York Times* reported Thursday that “the president’s advisors had been testing the reaction to an increase of 20,000 to 30,000,” somewhat less than the 40,000 troops requested by General McChrystal. The announcement is expected to come soon after the Thanksgiving holiday. The *Times* reported that members of Congress “anticipated a decision in time to hold hearings the week of Nov. 30.”

Openly promoting a speedy escalation, the *New York Times*, in an editorial entitled “Mr. Obama’s Task” warned that “the longer Mr. Obama waits, the more indecisive he seems and the more constrained his options appear.”

The editors of the *Times* continued, “It seems clear that this is not the time for a precipitous withdrawal, nor can the United States cling to the status quo while the Taliban gains even more territory and more power.”

From the erstwhile liberals of the *Times* to the Republican right, escalation of the war is the consensus position within the predominant layers of the US political establishment. America’s ruling elite is not prepared to relinquish the original aims of the war—the assertion of US hegemony over the strategically vital and oil-rich region of Central Asia. Moreover, it fears that a withdrawal of American forces would signal a qualitative deepening of American capitalism’s decline as a world power.

On the morning that Karzai was inaugurated, two more US soldiers were killed when a suicide bomber blew himself up at the gate of a NATO base in southern Zabul province. The United Nations mission in Afghanistan reported that over 2,000 Afghan civilians have been killed in the war so far this year—undoubtedly a serious underestimation. The one certain effect of Obama’s coming escalation of the war will be a major increase in these death tolls.



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