

Afghanistan: Karzai picks cabinet of US stooges and warlord cronies

Bill Van Auken
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Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai announced his second-term cabinet last Saturday, retaining roughly half of his incumbent ministers, including those with the closest ties to Washington. Also included in the lineup are figures tied to Afghan warlords who helped him rig the presidential election last August.

The cabinet selection was closely watched by Washington and the other Western powers that are contributing troops to the eight-year-old occupation. Following a presidential election marked by wholesale fraud and a decree granting Karzai another term in the face of an aborted second round vote, Western officials looked to the cabinet announcement as an opportunity for the Afghan president to do something to legitimize his regime and distance himself from its rampant corruption.

There were no indications that he did anything of the kind. Karzai also apparently failed to act on a proposal floated in the aftermath of the fraudulent presidential vote to establish a government of “national unity” with supporters of his principal rival, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah.

Western governments greeted the cabinet selections with little enthusiasm. In public statements they were referred to as “positive,” while unnamed officials told the media that “things could have been worse.”

Washington distinguished itself by signaling its desire to block some of Karzai’s appointments.

“We look forward to the lower house of parliament carrying out their duty to vet and approve candidates who will contribute to Afghanistan’s progress towards institutional reform, security and prosperity,” US Embassy spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden said.

The Obama administration and US military commanders have repeatedly insisted that a crackdown on official corruption and the provision of services to the people are essential to the success of the “surge” that has begun dispatching another 30,000 US soldiers and Marines to suppress Afghan resistance to foreign occupation.

The Karzai regime is widely viewed in Afghanistan as corrupt, impotent and a puppet of the US embassy. Washington is seen as an accomplice in the corruption, in which billions of dollars in aid are poured into the pockets of a narrow layer of

politically connected Afghans protected by American troops.

The positive marks given by the imperialist powers to Karzai for his cabinet picks came largely in response to his retention of four cabinet members, some appointed in a US-backed shakeup in October 2008, who are considered loyal to Washington.

The holdovers include Defense Minister Rahim Wardak, the chief Afghan official responsible for building up the Afghan army. Wardak, a former Mujahedeen commander in the CIA-financed war against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul in the 1980s, came to prominence in post-US invasion Afghanistan in large part thanks to political connections in Washington. These included relations forged by his American son, Hamed, to the Republican right.

While his father got the defense post, Hamed netted lucrative contracts from both the Pentagon and the Afghan Defense Ministry. NCL Holdings, the company run by the defense minister’s son, was recently awarded a \$360 million deal for trucking supplies to US military bases.

The other “reformers” favored by the US and retained by Karzai are Interior Minister Hanif Atmar, a former member of the secret police under the pro-Soviet regime, the Canadian-trained finance minister, Oma Zakhilwal, a former consultant for the World Bank, and Agricultural Minister Asif Rahimi, who studied at the University of Nebraska in Omaha.

Also praised was Karzai’s decision not to reappoint two ministers who were involved in some of the most egregious corruption scandals in recent years: Mining Minister Muhammad Ibrahim Adel, who has been accused of accepting a \$20 million bribe for steering a \$3 billion mining project to a Chinese firm, and Sediq Chakari, the minister of Islamic affairs, who is under investigation for embezzlement of funds appropriated for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

Some of Karzai’s other appointments were met with less enthusiasm by the US and its allies. These include the retention of Ismail Khan, minister of power and water and a prominent Tajik warlord. Long the dominant political force in Herat province, Khan is considered suspect for his alleged ties to Iran. Several other appointees are also tied to warlords who helped Karzai during the rigged election last August.

Reactions of Afghans to the appointments appeared to be overwhelmingly hostile. “Every one of these ministers will

leave the country if things get worse, Mohammed Mehdi Saie, a businessman, told the *Financial Times*. “Even now most of their family members are abroad. They have filled up their pockets, their children’s pockets and their grandchildren’s pockets.”

The Chinese news agency Xinhua quoted “an ordinary Afghan citizen, Farooq Shah,” as saying, “These faces have failed to bring a change in our life over the past eight years, and so, their remaining in office would not change our life in the next five years, particularly in the face of a reduction to the world community’s contribution.”

Karzai’s announcement follows last week’s charge by United Nations officials that Peter Galbraith, the former US diplomat who was installed as the number two man in the United Nations mission in Kabul, had floated a proposal for the ouster of Karzai in the wake of the fraudulent election last August. A UN-run watchdog agency concluded that fully one third of the ballots counted in that contest were phony.

The charge was made in a letter drafted by Galbraith’s boss in Afghanistan, Kai Eide of Norway, which was quoted extensively in the *New York Times* last Friday.

Eide said in the letter that Galbraith was removed from his UN post after Eide rejected “Mr. Galbraith’s proposal to replace Mr. Karzai and install a more Western-friendly figure.” At the time, Galbraith’s departure from the mission was attributed to discord over his criticism of Eide for failing to take a more aggressive stand against the election fraud.

According to Eide, Galbraith had proposed conducting a “secret mission to Washington” to convince Vice President Biden and President Obama that “President Karzai should be forced to resign as president.” The proposal, according to the *Times* account, was that “a new government would be installed led by a former finance minister, Ashraf Ghani, or a former interior minister, Ali A. Jalali, both favorites of American officials.”

Galbraith, who is suing the UN over his firing, denied Eide’s account, insisting that while he “discussed a way out” of the post-election crisis, “that is an entirely different matter from acting on it.”

Eide reported that Karzai learned of the proposal and was “deeply upset.” He added, “I spent quite some time trying to calm down the accusations of international interference by talking to the president.”

The controversy over Afghan policy has surfaced as Galbraith is confronting conflict of interest charges over his role as an adviser to the Iraqi Kurdish government in helping to craft an Iraqi constitution that established the Kurdish entity’s autonomy over its oilfields. He now reportedly stands to make \$100 million from a deal he negotiated between Kurdish officials and a Norwegian oil company for which he was working.

Galbraith’s proposal on Afghanistan came in the context of open discussions within the US media and foreign policy

circles over whether Karzai would become another Diem, the Vietnamese ruler whom the CIA helped oust from power and assassinate in 1963, as the US prepared to escalate its intervention in Vietnam.

Galbraith was placed at the UN mission in Afghanistan at the request of the Obama administration’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who was reportedly also pressing for Washington to confront the Afghan president more forcefully. Holbrooke said he was unaware of Galbraith’s proposal, though the *Times* cited Galbraith and “a senior UN official” as saying that a member of Holbrooke’s staff participated in the meetings where it was discussed.

In the end, the Obama administration dropped its objections to the rigged election and congratulated Karzai for his “victory” after his hand-picked council decreed his re-election. Washington apparently determined it had no viable replacement for the Afghan president.

As part of the escalation of the Afghanistan war, the Obama administration may seek to sideline Karzai even more, assuming increasingly direct control of key ministries. According to a report published by the British *Guardian* on November 30, plans have been drawn up for the appointment of a “chief executive” to assume day-to-day responsibility for the Afghan regime.

In addition, Holbrooke has proposed that an international “high representative” be installed in Kabul, modeled on the institution created by Washington and its NATO allies in Bosnia. There, the high representative has the power to decree or annul laws without the approval of Bosnian government institutions and to remove officials from government office at will.

According to the *Guardian*, European governments with troops in Afghanistan have opposed the plan. They fear that that the marginalization of the United Nations and the creation of an all-powerful international viceroy will only further expose the illegitimacy and colonial character of the US military intervention in Afghanistan.



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