



# Slipping Back Into Chaos: Karzai's Afghanistan

**Hamid Karzai Panned for Weak Leadership While Iraq's Al-Maliki Gets Praise**

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**July 15, 2008** —

While Afghanistan continues to slip into chaos, with a sharp increase in Taliban-led attacks on U.S. troops, a booming opium harvest and stalled reconstruction efforts, questions are being raised about President Hamid Karzai's leadership of the troubled country.

Karzai, known for his debonair fashion sense, was hailed as the face of Afghanistan's future when he was promoted by the coalition forces that overthrew the Taliban in 2001.

In the early days after he decisively won the 2004 presidential election, he was widely praised for his steady leadership during the country's fragile new era. But in recent months Karzai has come under fire, literally and figuratively.

Karzai, who narrowly survived an assassination attempt in April, has taken the brunt of the blame for not acting forcefully against a resurgent Taliban and for failing to stem endemic corruption in the security forces and reconstruction teams in the desperately poor country.

Things have deteriorated so badly that some Afghans say they preferred the rule of the Taliban, which imposed strict Shariah religious law in the country from 1996 to 2001, according to Afghanistan experts.

"I just got a letter from someone in Kandahar," says Barnett Rubin of the Council on Foreign Relations. "He says the situation is worse than it was under the Taliban. There is no clean water and no security."

The perception of Karzai's failures are even more glaring in light of the stunning rebound of Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki, who turned around a reputation for weak leadership by taking forceful action against Shiite militias and consolidating his political base.

After Maliki ordered his forces to retake Basras, ordinary Iraqis celebrated by downloading his face onto their cell phones as screen savers and President Bush praised him, saying that the decision demonstrated Maliki's "leadership and his commitment to enforce the law in an even-handed manner."

Though the two leaders rule over vastly dissimilar countries <sup>0014</sup> Afghanistan is a rural and tribal culture where power is largely decentralized, while Iraq's relatively educated population has long been ruled by a strong leader <sup>000</sup> Karzai and Maliki's disparate fortunes are striking nonetheless.

## **Afghanistan Troop Deaths Surpass Iraq**

For U.S. forces, Afghanistan's deterioration is critical. With its violent sectarian fighting and homegrown insurgency, Iraq has long taken the focus of the American public and American policymakers off Afghanistan. But renewed violence in Afghanistan poses an increasingly imminent threat.

In May 2007, 126 American soldiers were killed in Iraq compared to 11 in Afghanistan. Of course, there are roughly four times as many troops in Iraq.

The situation is now reversed, with June U.S. and coalition troop deaths in Afghanistan surpassing those in Iraq, where there are roughly four times as many troops, for the second month in a row. On Sunday, nearly 200 Taliban fighters overran an American-run outpost in a well-coordinated attack, killing nine U.S. soldiers, the worst single loss for the American military in the country since June 2005.

In addition, attacks using improvised explosive devices rose 35 percent last year, according to a recent Pentagon report that laid the blame for the poor state of Afghan security forces on corruption, a shortage of trainers, and "a lack of unity of effort within the international community."

In a press conference this morning, President Bush emphasized a commitment of U.S. troops to the country.

"We are surging troops in Afghanistan. We'll analyze the situation, of course, make a determination based on the conditions on the ground," Bush said. "And we make sure a strategy works that not only provides security, but provides economic follow-up after security has been enhanced."

Bush pledged to investigate Karzai's claim that Pakistan's intelligence service was to blame for a recent terrorist attack, and he acknowledged the recent flow of violent extremists from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

"First of all, we'll investigate his charge and we'll work with his service to get to the bottom of his allegation," Bush said. "No question, however, that some extremists are coming out of parts of Pakistan into Afghanistan. And that's troubling to us, it's troubling to Afghanistan, and it should be troubling to Pakistan."

### **'Incapable of Making Strong Decisions'**

Although Afghanistan experts attribute much of the country's troubles to the lack of international aid and security training, they emphasize that Karzai is not the right man to lead the country out of its morass.

"If you're looking for someone to correct things that are going badly and you've got someone who's looking over his shoulder all the time, then that's not the right leadership," says Marvin Weinbaum, a scholar in residence at the Middle East Institute.

"Karzai seems very indecisive and seems incapable of making strong decisions," Weinbaum says. "He is a conciliator who operates like a tribal chief, buying off a little bit here and there, striking deals with people who are pretty unsavory."

Weinbaum says Karzai's recent saber-rattling threat to send forces into Pakistan to fight militants responsible for cross-border attacks was intended to shore up his nationalistic credentials as he gears up for the 2009 elections.

The situation has become so volatile and unstable that some predict those elections will be postponed due to security concerns.

"If it continues like this, it will endanger the elections," says Ahmed Rashid, the author of "Descent Into Chaos," who says that the sanctuary given to Taliban fighters in Pakistan is the single greatest problem facing Afghanistan.

Rashid blames the lack of American focus on the resurgence of the Taliban, explaining that Karzai is frustrated with the lack of resources necessary to tackle the security situation in his country.

But he says Karzai's conciliatory leadership style, which was appropriate to bring the country together after

the Taliban was overthrown, has become a liability in recent years when a "tough hand" is required to deal with the resurgent militants.

"There is increasing criticism of his lack of good governance, not dealing with corruption, not dealing with drugs, and not taking a firm stance to deal with the security problems," Rashid says.

### **No Prosecution for Warlord**

Karzai has been widely criticized for his decision not to prosecute or remove Uzbek warlord Abdus Rashid Dostum, the commander in chief of the Afghan Army, who was accused of brazenly beating up and kidnapping his former election manager in Kabul in February.

"People were saying, 'Why didn't Karzai fire Dostum?'" Rubin says. "[Dostum]'s very influential in the provinces and has armed groups that would answer his call. Karzai wanted to know if he could count on backup from NATO and he was told no. & Karzai could have said, 'It's important, and I'm going to do what I have to do' without getting the OK. He's a conciliator and he's not a chief executive."

Afghan Ambassador to the U.S. Said. T. Jawad defended Karzai, explaining that Dostum is one of many individuals incorporated into the Afghan government with the blessing of the international community and the Afghan government.

"There are individuals in the government whom you and I would like to see brought to justice, but we have to have the proper system set up to deliver justice to every criminal," he says. "Are we better off starting another cycle of violence or should we wait to have the necessary institutions in place? For the sake of stability, both the Afghan government and the international community has not emphasized delivery of justice as a priority at this time."

### **International Community to Blame?**

Yet Rubin says Karzai's failings are not the cause of Afghanistan's problems. Instead, he lays the blame on the international community and U.S. strategy in the region.

"He is not the president of Pakistan, and he has been pointing out that militants coming over from Pakistan is one of the greatest threats to Afghanistan, but no one has been listening to him in [Washington] D.C.," Rubin says.

Jawad echoed those comments, claiming, "When 200 armed men cross over from Pakistan and attack a military outpost, this has not much to do with the Afghan government or corruption within that government. This has to do with insurgents and Taliban fighters getting sanctuary in Pakistan."

The ambassador explained that the ability of the Afghan government and Karzai to deliver services and provide protection to its people has been hampered by a lack of financial resources and human capital, adding that there have significant gains in education and health services.

"It is not fair to give credit to the international community for what works and to blame the Afghan government for what doesn't work so well."

Middle East experts emphasized that Karzai and Maliki cannot be credibly compared.

"Maliki and the U.S. may have finally got the notion of how to do it right," says Weinbaum. "But you can't place him alongside Karzai. The countries really are that different. The insurgency challenge in Afghanistan is very different, there is less in the way of human capital to work with, people you can turn to take on

responsibility. In Iraq, you had fairly functional educational system. That doesn't exist in Afghanistan, where they've had 30 years of constant warfare."

The United States did not devote enough resources to training Afghan police and to reconstruction of the country, says Rubin. "The fundamental problem is that we have enunciated maximal goals and then used minimal resources to achieve them," he says.

That situation leaves Karzai without much leverage or power to exert against the Taliban and corrupt warlords in his country, Rubin says.

"Talking big while having no stick is not effective."

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