

## A Vote Is Cast Against The Warlords

Interim leader Hamid Karzai has launched his candidacy for presidential elections with a bold step against powerful warlords. With voters concerned most about security, and no unified opposition, Karzai is almost sure to win at the polls

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By Ahmed Rashid/Kabul

With Afghanistan's first-ever direct democratic presidential elections due in October, President Hamid Karzai's plan to run for a five-year term has not been in doubt. What most Afghans have wanted to know is if he would use the opportunity to break the grip on his government by warlords, the regional leaders with official posts and private militias who have stood in the way of democracy and stability since the defeat of the Taliban.

After weeks of meetings with aides and tribal leaders, Karzai took the plunge on July 26. Minutes before the deadline to nominate candidates, he announced that he had dropped his first vice-president, Defence Minister Gen. Mohammed Fahim, from his election ticket.

Fahim has been blamed for blocking institutional reforms and giving protection to warlords. The decision to drop him could prove to be Karzai's most momentous move since he accepted the job of interim president in December 2001.

"Warlord militias are a bigger problem than the Taliban because militias are undermining the institutional build-up of Afghanistan," Karzai told the Review days before the announcement. "Militia armies are posing a great threat to that and we have to address and resolve it."

The campaign for the October 9 election officially opens in September, but Karzai's move was top-notch campaign theatrics. Fahim has been increasingly unpopular among Afghans concerned about security. Adding to the impact, Karzai nominated as one of two running mates another Tajik from the Panjshir Valley, Ahmad Zia Masud, ambassador to Moscow and a younger brother of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masud, who was assassinated by Al Qaeda on September 9, 2001. The choice of another Panjshiri, the brother of a man considered by many to be a national hero, could ensure the support of a share of Tajik voters, who are Afghanistan's second-largest ethnic group.

Karzai's second running mate will be current Vice-President Karim Khalili of the Hazara ethnic group. Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun, also presented a list of reform-minded ministers and politicians who he said would support him.

Over 20 candidates have registered to run for president, from Uzbek warlord Gen. Rashid Dostum to a female doctor, Masuda Jalal, who has opposed Karzai in the past. Karzai's main competition will likely come from an ally of Fahim, Yunis Qanuni, another Panjshiri.

With none of the opposition able to unite around a common candidate, Karzai is expected to win the election. However, the polls will be held under considerable security pressure. With United States President George W. Bush's 2001 pledge to rebuild Afghanistan still a distant chimera, warlords have become increasingly defiant of the central administration, creating almost weekly mini-crises in the provinces (see article on page 14).

In addition, the Taliban have been launching two to four attacks a day in southern Afghanistan from their bases in Pakistan. Their main targets have been United Nations and Afghan election officials. More than 650 people have been killed in Taliban attacks this year, including two dozen civilians attacked simply for carrying voter-registration cards.

The Taliban and the warlords have been supported this year by a booming drugs economy. UN officials say this year's opium harvest will increase 20% from the 3,600 tonnes that last year turned Afghanistan into the world's

largest supplier of opium.

Despite these problems, Afghans have huge expectations of the elections. About 80% of an estimated 10.5 million eligible voters have registered to vote; 41% of registered voters are women.

“Ordinary people have shown a remarkable enthusiasm for elections as a means for change and greater security,” says Reginald Austin, chief technical adviser to the Afghan-UN Joint Election Management Board.

Adults among the 2.5 million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan will also be voting, and Karzai has urged supporters of the Taliban “not responsible for being part of Al Qaeda or killing Afghan people” to vote as well.

Some 60 political parties are registering for parliamentary elections, which due to security and preparation concerns have been delayed until April 2005. The split of the elections has been criticized by the opposition to Karzai—warlords, religious leaders and politicians—who say that without a parliament from October Karzai could emerge as a dictator.

Karzai, outlining his long-term priorities, doesn’t sound like one. “My agenda will be to move Afghanistan [GDP] from \$200 per capita to \$700-1,000 in the next seven to 10 years,” he says. “To make Afghanistan a trade and business land bridge between Central and South Asia and build on good relations with our neighbours. To carry out fundamental institutional reforms and to especially institutionalize democracy, to create respect for the rule of law, build an army and police force and create a performance-orientated administration.”

Meanwhile, the incumbent has been taking the public pulse at daily lunches with tribal and ethnic leaders in the palace garden, under the watchful eyes of American and Afghan security guards. Visitors tell Karzai that their priority is security and the end of warlordism, followed by education, jobs and roads.

Security for the election, which has already been delayed twice, is not assured. During the official campaign month, candidates will have access to media, particularly radio, but travel around the country to meet the voters will be difficult, with poor roads and poor security.

The government’s new army, being trained by the U.S. and France, can’t handle the load alone, numbering only 12,000 men. Interior Minister Ali Jalali says he will have some 30,000 trained policemen on duty—barely enough to cover polling stations in towns, let alone the countryside. The U.S. has 17,000 troops operating in the country,

primarily in the hunt for Al Qaeda but ready to handle election security in the south and west. And Nato’s 6,500-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with about 1,800 additional troops arriving for eight weeks during the elections, will handle security in the north.

That may not be enough. “Having more forces would allow me to reduce the risk and support the elections better,” says head of ISAF Lt.-Gen. Rick Hillier. Nato and the U.S. have yet to commit forces to cover the parliamentary elections.

While the U.S. has concentrated primarily on ensuring that elections proceed, many reform-minded cabinet ministers are concerned that the U.S. has lacked the resolve to support the administration in disarming the militias and in other long-term stabilization projects.

Karzai’s decision to dump Fahim meant winning over his American benefactors, who were slow to support the move even as officials from the UN, the European Union and Britain urged them to do so. Fahim, as leader of the Northern Alliance after Masud’s death, was a key ally of the U.S. in ousting the Taliban after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S. The U.S. also relies on the help of some warlord militias in its efforts to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

In early July, U.S. officials were involved with Karzai in trying to strike a deal with the warlords to include them on his ticket for the elections. That plan fell through when it was blocked by reformists in the Afghan cabinet.

U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad told the Review prior to Karzai's announcement, "If the warlords take part in [the disarmament process] and show a willingness to reform themselves, they can certainly be part of Afghanistan's future." Speaking to the press afterwards, Khalilzad voiced concern that dropping Fahim would increase tensions between Karzai and his rivals.

But the U.S.'s focus on its own military concerns and on making sure elections are held have been seen as problematic. "The U.S. has sat on the sidelines on major stabilization issues, such as disarming warlords, drugs control and administrative reforms which needed to be speeded up before the elections," says a senior European diplomat in Kabul.

The risk of disruptions is high. But with Fahim off the ticket, the next government may be able to push harder on reforms and disarmament, in turn encouraging greater international commitment to rebuilding the country.