

Afghanistan's Modest Progress

In a Flurry of Initiatives, Karzai Seeks to Extend Kabul's Writ

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Kabul, Afghanistan

In his six months as Afghanistan's elected president, Hamid Karzai has struggled to transcend his image as a politically hamstrung "mayor of Kabul" whose nation's security was the purview of local warlords and meddling foreign governments. He is making progress, but in what he calls "Afghan time."

Last month, Mr. Karzai ordered the dismissal of 29 corrupt provincial officials and issued a decree forbidding others from holding the dual political-military roles that make for warlords. He also decreed that the mammoth task of disarming and demobilizing warlord armies be completed by June, and has pushed forward with plans to improve tax and tariff collections, aiming to undermine the black-market economy that sustains warlords while starving government coffers. He is confronting the threat from abroad as well, signing nonaggression pacts on Dec. 22 with Afghanistan's most meddlesome neighbors.

It's unclear why Mr. Karzai has suddenly taken the offensive after months of apparent temporizing. He may feel emboldened by a recently announced U.S. plan to establish a dozen or so havens for aid workers, or by having narrowly survived an assassination attempt in September, thanks to his American bodyguards. Another reason for urgency: He needs to secure the countryside before the spring start of nearly \$1 billion in foreign-funded construction projects, and before October's promulgation of a constitution now being drafted by an independent commission.

Whatever his motive, he sounds increasingly confident about overcoming the primary challenge to Kabul's authority. "The warlords know that they cannot survive without the center, and they are not strong enough to challenge the center," he said in an interview. "There may be acts of defiance, but no challenge."

He also hopes the Dec. 22 Kabul Declaration will put some diplomatic space between Afghanistan and neighbors China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which pledged to abandon their age-old habit of seeking regional advantage by manipulating this or that Afghan ethnic group.

"We are not going to be a political football for neighbors in the region as we were in the 1990s," said Mr. Karzai. "The soil of Afghanistan cannot be used by any country against a third country."

To be sure, Mr. Karzai's progress has been halting. Several of the 29 fired officials have simply refused to resign, and some powerful warlords -- notably Herat-based Ismail Khan -- refuse to disarm. And while U.S. and United Nations military officers see a critical change of attitude by another ethnic power center -- the Tajik-dominated Ministry of Defense led by former warlord Mohammed Fahim -- it's a qualified change. After months of fence-straddling, Gen. Fahim now says he is with the fledgling government and has "no real opposition" to the centralization of military authority in the planned 70,000-man national military. But Gen. Fahim has been slow to implement a U.S.-funded effort to modernize and diversify the defense ministry by replacing at least 33 senior officers with non-Tajiks. (This month, Mr. Fahim will make his first visit to Washington, where he says he will ask the U.S. to accelerate its training of Afghan troops, only 2,000 of which are ready.)

And despite the Kabul Declaration, there's no guarantee that the neighbors will keep hands off; many expect the U.S. presence in Afghanistan to wind down if a war against Iraq starts, leaving Mr. Karzai's government to split along ethnic lines. While Russia, for example, promised \$100 million in equipment for the new Afghan army, it seems clear that this will flow -- over U.S. objections -- to forces under Gen. Fahim's control and separate from the nascent national military.

Fortunately for Mr. Karzai, the other key ingredient of Afghanistan's revival is falling into place. By March, major reconstruction projects are to begin. Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani says plans to rebuild 2,350 miles of roads will offer demobilized warlord armies employment opportunities and the chance to learn new skills,

while helping the central government extend its writ. Mr. Ghani plans to pump \$300 million into rural aid programs aimed at improving health, education, power supply and irrigation, while funding micro-credit schemes for farmers, a move that should further undermine warlord powers. "Aid is coming, but it's not being evenly distributed at the present," says Mr. Ghani. "I want Afghanistan to stand on its own feet and generate its own wealth so that we can contribute to the world economy rather than being a burden upon it."

The biggest unknown remains the potential of al Qaeda and Taliban forces to launch guerrilla attacks against U.S. bases and government offices in the south and east. Such attacks have escalated in recent weeks, and the more the government spreads its writ through development projects, the more targets extremists will have to shoot at.

Still, a fundamental shift in expectations is under way that may prove the most crucial development of all: Mr. Karzai is immensely popular, and people are looking to him -- more than warlords or Islamic extremists -- to deliver the development that would change their lives. "Politics has to have some moral standing," says Mr. Karzai. "The Taliban had no moral standing, so they could destroy the country but not build it. The people recognize the difference between them and us."