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Karzai makes changes in Afghan security leadership

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Potential presidential candidate Omar Daudzai was appointed as Afghanistan's acting interior minister on Sunday, putting him in a high-profile public role seven months before the country's first democratic transfer of power.

Daudzai will move back to Kabul from Islamabad, where he has been ambassador to Pakistan since 2011 during a time of fractious ties between the two neighbours.

Last month Daudzai, a former chief of staff to President Hamid Karzai, set up an office in Kabul and announced that he would be a “probable” candidate in the elections due on April 5.

Karzai, who is barred from standing for a third term, has said he will not back any runner in the wide-open race, but Daudzai is seen as one of his closest associates and loyalists.

Daudzai, 55, from Afghanistan's biggest ethnic group the Pashtuns, was a member of the Hezb-e-Islami faction during the Soviet occupation and later went on to work for the United Nations.

Presidential spokesman Rafi Ferdous confirmed the appointment, which came after interior minister Mujtaba Patang was ousted by parliament last month over accusations that he had failed to thwart the threat from Taliban rebels.

Patang was dismissed soon after the Afghan government formally took responsibility for nationwide security from US-led Nato troops, but he remained as the “acting” interior minister until Sunday.

Afghanistan's 350,000-strong security forces are suffering a steep rise in attacks as the Nato combat mission winds down, with police and army casualties said to have increased by 15-20 per cent since 2011.

The Taliban have launched a spate of attacks across Afghanistan in recent days, with scores killed in suicide bombings, ambushes and rocket attacks, and also executed five aid workers who were kidnapped in Herat.

On Sunday, the bullet-riddled bodies of seven civilians kidnapped one week ago by the Taliban were found in Ghazni province, officials said.

The election to succeed Karzai, who has ruled since the Taliban hardliners were ousted in 2001, is seen as the key test of whether 12 years of massive international military and aid intervention has been worthwhile.

In 2010, Karzai confirmed press reports that Daudzai, a former ambassador to Tehran, received bags packed full of cash from Iran.

Karzai said they were transparent payments and the money was used to run the presidential office.

The president recently named controversial former warlord Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, 2009 runner-up Abdullah Abdullah and former finance minister Ashraf Ghani as possible candidates.

Other potential runners include Qayum Karzai, the president's brother, and former interior minister Ali Ahmad Jalali.

Karzai has pledged to work to ensure a smooth election, but international donors have expressed concern about whether the vote will produce a credible result after the 2009 was marred by massive fraud.

Daudzai will be the acting interior minister pending approval by parliament, and would have to resign before running for president.

Kabul's influential police chief Mohammad Ayoub Salangi was on Sunday named as deputy interior minister.