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Karzai's pick for parliament speaker accused of atrocities

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An Afghan warlord who's accused of gross human rights violations and was once close to Osama bin Laden has received the backing of President Hamid Karzai for the important post of speaker of the new parliament, which was inaugurated Wednesday.

To the dismay of diplomats and many lawmakers, especially women and those from Afghanistan's ethnic Hazara community, Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf, who's been accused of a string of atrocities during Afghanistan's civil war of the 1990s, is Karzai's early candidate for the speaker slot, members of parliament said.

The new parliament — the country's second since the Taliban regime fell in 2001 — like the first assembly contains a gallery of former "mujahedeen" warlords and guerrilla commanders who've been held responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians.

One member of parliament, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, suggested that Karzai wanted Sayyaf as speaker in order to rile the West.

The opening of the parliament was itself a major rebuff to Karzai, who last week had ordered a month's delay in order to investigate vote-rigging allegations against some members. Karzai

backed down under heavy international pressure and parliamentarians' threat to meet in a rump session, and at Wednesday's inauguration he seemed intent on getting even, accusing the West of "unnecessary" interference in his country.

He called for shutting down provincial reconstruction teams — the civil-military hybrid units that carry out development work alongside international troops — and for parliament to "put limits" on the operations of foreign forces. The international community has spent billions of dollars of aid, often through the provincial reconstruction teams, and some 150,000 coalition troops are stationed in Afghanistan.

"The existence of PRTs and other unnecessarily international institutions in our country are serious obstacles to the process of building government," Karzai told lawmakers. "There are some hands that are trying to kill the young democracy of Afghanistan."

Karzai's parliamentary affairs minister, Hodayoun Azizi, has been campaigning behind the scenes for Sayyaf, according to several lawmakers who said they'd been approached. While most lawmakers think that Karzai supports Sayyaf in the race to be speaker, a contest that hasn't officially kicked off yet, some think the president could switch to another candidate if he sees that Sayyaf isn't electable.

"The hands of these people (mujahedeen) are red with the blood of the Afghan people. ... Taliban and mujahedeen are the same for me," said Shukria Paikan, a female lawmaker from the northern province of Kunduz. "It's very obvious that Karzai is supporting Sayyaf."

Analysts and diplomats say that parliament will play an increasingly important role as the only political check on Karzai, and it's likely to provide much more opposition than the first parliament did. Having an ally as speaker would give the president a far better chance at managing the new parliament.

There's wide speculation that Karzai will seek changes to the constitution, including one that will allow him to run for office again. Any peace deal with the Taliban, which Karzai says he's seeking, also might require constitutional amendments, which only the parliament can pass.

"If Sayyaf is speaker, it is possible that Karzai can be president for a third time," said Abdul Latif Pedram, a lawmaker from the northern province of Badakhshan. "It's a difficult time for him and he needs a very close ally to be speaker."

Sayyaf was an early supporter of Karzai's presidency, and he remains loyal. Considered among the most Islamist of the warlords, he's marked by his closeness to Saudi Arabia and the kingdom's severe Wahhabi form of Islam.

His relationship with bin Laden, a Saudi, dates to the early 1980s, when both were fighting a U.S.-backed war against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Sayyaf is said to have been instrumental in bringing bin Laden back to Afghanistan in 1996 after he was expelled from Sudan.

The man who organized the first World Trade Center bombing, in 1993, Ramzi Yousef, reportedly trained at a camp run by Sayyaf. According to the 9/11 Commission report, Sayyaf also trained and mentored the alleged mastermind of the 2001 attack, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

For Afghans, Sayyaf is linked to some of the most horrific episodes of the country's civil war, in particular the 1993 killing of hundreds of ethnic Hazara civilians in the Afshar district of Kabul, a massacre that human rights groups accuse Sayyaf of ordering. Hazara are from the minority Shiite sect of Islam, which is anathema to Wahhabis.

A tall, well-built figure, Sayyaf, who's now 65, cuts an imposing presence, with a long white beard and flowing robes. He's a Pashtun, the biggest ethnic group in Afghanistan.

"Those who shave and wear neckties like me will not vote for Sayyaf. Nor will women. And not a single Hazara," said Mohammad Hashim Watanwal, a lawmaker from the central province of Uruzgan. "Karzai still thinks that this parliament will be like yesterday's parliament, where he had a majority. But he is mistaken."

If Sayyaf fails to receive the support of any female or Hazara lawmakers, he'd lose about 100 votes in the 249-seat parliament. Many favor the chances of the speaker of the last parliament, Mohammed Younus Qanooni, to be re-elected. Other leading contenders include the former deputy speaker, Mirwais Yaseeni, and Abdul Zahir Qadir, from the eastern province of Nangarhar. The election is expected to take place in the next few days.

Shekeba Hashemi, a lawmaker from Kandahar, Karzai's province in the south, said that there were rumors that the government would swing its weight behind Yaseeni, but she added that this was "propaganda."

"The government is pro-Sayyaf, but he does not have much chance," Hashemi said. "He has done some unforgettable things in the past."

One Western diplomat, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to talk to journalists, said Sayyaf's chances shouldn't be discounted, pointing out that Sayyaf narrowly lost the contest for the speaker role in 2005.

"Karzai is still the main source of patronage. He can get the Pashtuns to vote for him (Sayyaf); he may be able to divide and conquer the others," the diplomat said. "If Karzai wants to build a dynasty, he needs the cooperation of parliament."