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International Herald Tribune

Afghan leader finds himself hero no more

By Dexter Filkins

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A foretaste of what would be in store for President Hamid Karzai after the election of a new American administration came last February, when Joseph Biden Jr., then a senator, sat down to a formal dinner at the palace during a visit here.

Between platters of lamb and rice, Biden and two other American senators questioned Karzai about corruption in his government, which, by many estimates, is among the worst in the world. Karzai assured Biden and the other senators that there was no corruption at all and that, in any case, it was not his fault.

The senators gaped in astonishment. After 45 minutes, Biden threw down his napkin and stood up.

"This dinner is over," Biden announced, according to one of the people in the room at the time. And the three senators walked out, long before the appointed time.

Today, of course, Biden is the vice president.

The world has changed for Karzai, and for Afghanistan, too. A White House favorite — a celebrity in flowing cape and dark gray fez — in each of the seven years that he has led this country since the fall of the Taliban, Karzai now finds himself not so favored at all. Not by Washington, and not by his own.

In the White House, President Barack Obama said he regarded Karzai as unreliable and ineffective. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said he presided over a "narco-state." The Americans making Afghan policy, worried that the war is being lost, are vowing to bypass Karzai and deal directly with the governors in the countryside.

At home, Karzai faces a widening insurgency and a population that blames him for the manifest lack of economic progress and the corrupt officials that seem to stand at every doorway of his government. His face, which once adorned the walls of tea shops across the country, is today much less visible.

Now, perhaps crucially, an election looms. Karzai says he will ask the voters to return him to the palace for another five-year term. The election is set for Aug. 20, after what promises to be a violent and eventful summer. In a poll commissioned by a group of private Afghans, 85 percent of those surveyed said they intended to vote for someone other than Karzai.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration will have to decide what it wants from Karzai as it tries to make good on its promise to reverse the course of the war. Or whether it wants him at all.

With the insurgency rising, corruption soaring and opium blooming across the land, it perhaps is not surprising that so many Afghans, and so many in Washington, see President Karzai's removal as a precondition for reversing the country's downward surge.

"Under President Karzai, we have gone from a better situation to a good situation to a not-so-bad situation to a bad situation — and now are going to worse," said Abdullah, a former foreign minister in Karzai's government who may now challenge him for the presidency (and who, like many Afghans, has only one name). "That is the trend.

"So let us say Karzai stays in power through the summer and that nothing serious happens and then he wins re-election," Abdullah said. "Then there will be two scenarios, and only two scenarios — a rapid collapse or a slow unraveling."

People close to Karzai say the man is exhausted, wary of his enemies and worried for his physical safety. He feels embattled and underappreciated, they say, but is utterly determined, in spite of it all, to run again and win. In recent weeks, the growing American dissatisfaction with Karzai, coupled with a simmering frustration among Afghans over what they regard as the reckless killing of civilians by American forces, has prompted extraordinary reactions from Karzai.

At a news conference on Tuesday at his marble-floored palace, Karzai appeared side-by-side with Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary general. Karzai wore his signature outfit of fez and cape, but his visage was wan and slack. Asked by an Afghan reporter about his relations with American leaders, Karzai sprang to life, accusing unidentified people in the American government of trying to "pressure" him to stay silent over the deaths of Afghan civilians in attacks by Americans.

"Our demands are clear — to stop the civilian casualties, the searching of Afghan homes and the arresting Afghans," Karzai said of the Americans. "And of course, the Americans pressured us to be quiet and to make us retreat from our demands. But that is impossible. Afghanistan and its president are not going to retreat from their demands."

Karzai did not touch on larger frustrations, which Afghan and Western officials here say he harbors, about the overall American effort, namely, the relegation of Afghanistan to second-tier status after the invasion of Iraq. Many Afghans and Western officials here believe that it was the Iraq war, more than any other factor, that deprived Karzai of the resources he needed

to help the Afghan state stand on its own, and to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban that Obama is now vowing to contain.

Yet for all the doubts about Karzai — and for all the strains he labors under — he remains by far the strongest politician in the country. He commands the resources of the Afghan state, including the army and the police, and billions of dollars in American and other aid that flows into the treasury.

In his seven years in office, Karzai has successfully presided over the transition of the Afghan state from the devastated, pre-modern institution it was under the Taliban to the deeply troubled but largely democratic one it is today. Perhaps most important for his future, Karzai has assembled a team of senior administrators whose competence and experience would be difficult for any challenger to match.

Perhaps for that reason, of the many prominent Afghans who have hinted that they may run against him, including Abdullah and a former finance minister, Ashraf Ghani, only a handful of Afghans have so far declared their intentions. Some Afghan leaders say they will announce their candidacies soon, but it seems just as likely that they are waiting to see if Karzai stumbles.

As for the members of Obama's team, they may yet discover that Karzai is the man they will be forced to deal with, whether they like him or not.

At the palace news conference, Karzai acknowledged his own unpopularity, and then offered a vigorous defense of his record. He declined to be interviewed for this article.

"Well, I have been in government for seven years. It's natural that I would not be as popular now as I was seven years ago," Karzai said.

"The institutions of Afghanistan have worked very well," he added. "The Afghan people participated in the election for president. They participated in elections for Parliament. The parliamentary system has been functioning a lot better than some established parliaments in the world. They have been making laws, approving laws. The government institutions are increasingly in progress — the economy, the national army, the growth of education. We went from almost two or three universities in 2002 to 17 universities, to the freedom of the press, hundreds of newspapers and radios and all that. I and the Afghan people are proud of our achievements."

And, he might also have said, six million Afghan children attending school, a quarter of whom are girls, whose education was prohibited by the Taliban.

One of the people with the most generous words for Karzai is William Wood, the American ambassador. Under the ambassador's former boss, President George W. Bush, Karzai enjoyed a favored personal status, even if his state did not. That special relationship was symbolized by the videoconferences in which the two men participated regularly.

"The guy works very hard," Wood said of Karzai. "He faces a problem set every day that would daunt anyone. He's got an insurgency based outside the country, and a level of poverty and criminality inside the country that feeds the insurgency. He's got an army that had to be

built from zero following the ouster of the Taliban. He's got a police force that had to be reformed.

Speaking in an interview at his office in Kabul, Wood added: "Yeah, I think he's tired. And I think frankly that everyone — the international community, the United States, the United Nations, Western Europe, the international press — were unrealistically optimistic about the problem of Afghanistan following the ouster of the Taliban."

Wood will soon be replaced by Lieutenant General Karl W. Eikenberry, a former commander of American forces here.

In his last tour, which ended in 2007, Eikenberry enjoyed good relations with Karzai. Given Karzai's mood these days, that is probably a good thing.

At a ceremony last month for the first graduates of Afghanistan's National Military Academy, Karzai stood and addressed the assembled 84 cadets as well as a group of diplomats, including Wood. Karzai turned the occasion into a populist barnburner.

"I told America and the world to give us aircraft — otherwise we will get them from the other place!" Karzai roared, prompting applause. "I told them to give us the planes soon, that we have no more patience, and that we cannot get along without military aircraft!"

"Give us the aircraft sooner or we will get them from the others!" Karzai roared again. "We told them to bring us tanks, too — otherwise we will get them from other place!"

Karzai never said what the "other place" was.