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The Globe and Mail

Karzai accuses UN, international community of election interference

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President Hamid Karzai lashed out at the UN and the international community Thursday, accusing them of interfering in last year's fraud-tarnished presidential election and seeking to weaken his authority after parliament rejected his bid to expand his control over the country's electoral institutions.

Although he did not specifically mention the United States, Mr. Karzai's harsh words yesterday – and his practice of blaming foreigners for the nation's problems – reflect his increasingly difficult relations with Washington and its international allies.

U.S. President Barack Obama paid an unannounced visit to Kabul on Sunday in hopes of setting a new tone in dealings with the Afghan leader, as the U.S.-led coalition prepares for a showdown with the Taliban this summer in its southern stronghold of Kandahar. The Obama administration has maintained a reliable Afghan political partner is critical to turning back the Taliban.

But Mr. Karzai's international stature was battered last year after a UN-backed watchdog committee threw out nearly a third of his votes in the Aug. 20 presidential election, denying him a first-round victory and forcing him into a runoff, which was cancelled after his remaining challenger dropped out.

Mr. Karzai's comments, delivered to employees of the state election commission, also sharpened the power struggle with an increasingly independent-minded parliament over whether foreigners will help oversee parliamentary balloting scheduled for September.

On Wednesday, the lower house of parliament cancelled a decree Mr. Karzai issued in February revoking the authority of the United Nations to appoint most of the members of the Electoral Complaints Commission that threw out his ballots last year.

During his speech Thursyesterday, Mr. Karzai acknowledged there had been “vast fraud” in the August vote, which returned him to office for a second five-year term. But he blamed the fraud on the United Nations and other foreign organizations, which he suggested were part of an international conspiracy to deny him re-election or tarnish his victory.

“No doubt, there was huge fraud. There was vast fraud. The fraud is not by the Afghans. This fraud has been done by the foreigners,” Mr. Karzai said, naming officials of the UN, the European Union and “the embassies here in Kabul.”

He accused unidentified foreign embassies of trying to bribe members of the Karzai-appointed Independent Election Commission with offers of bulletproof cars in hopes they would block his first-round victory.

“See, this election was occurring during a time where there were threats from the terrorists,” Mr. Karzai said of the August vote. “It was not only the threat from the terrorists. But seriously, it took place under the threat of foreign interference.”

Mr. Karzai singled out the former UN deputy chief in Afghanistan, Peter Galbraith, and the chief European Union observer, retired French General Philippe Morillon, accusing them of pressuring election authorities. Mr. Galbraith, the senior American in the UN mission in Kabul, was fired last year after accusing his boss, Kai Eide, of downplaying election fraud.

“What this really suggests is that [Mr.] Karzai has a slim connection with reality,” Mr. Galbraith told the Associated Press by telephone from Rome. “I think it underscores the importance that the upcoming parliamentary elections should be run by non-partisan election bodies with no Karzai appointees.”

Mr. Galbraith said any foreign government that helps fund the election without major reforms “is asking for its taxpayers to be defrauded.”

“Frankly, I think [Mr.] Karzai is a bit unhinged,” he added.

Mr. Karzai also said foreigners were looking for excuses not to help fund the September election because they “want a parliament that is weak and for me to be an ineffective president.”

Grant Kippen, the Canadian who ran the Electoral Complaints Commission last year, said if Mr. Karzai has evidence of impropriety in the August vote, “either Afghan or international,” then he has a responsibility “to back this claim up with evidence.”

“I would strongly suggest that efforts now concentrate on addressing the problems that were evident in last year's elections and that practical solutions be found that will strengthen the

process going forward so that public trust and confidence can be restored,” Mr. Kippen told the AP in an e-mail.

The Obama administration has long harboured doubts about Mr. Karzai, who had been a favourite of the Bush administration after he was installed as head of an Afghan transition administration following the collapse of Taliban rule in late 2001. But Mr. Obama was critical of Mr. Karzai from the start, stating last December when he announced his troop surge that “the days of providing a blank cheque are over.”

In the weeks before the announcement, the U.S. ambassador to Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, expressed doubts about any troop buildup while there were so many questions about Mr. Karzai's leadership and reliability as a partner, according to senior U.S. officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Such criticism angered Mr. Karzai, encouraging fears the Americans were trying to undermine him ahead of the August election. Although U.S. officials have acknowledged Mr. Karzai's legitimacy, his recent visits to China and Iran, as well as hosting Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, appeared aimed at showing he has options for support from countries other than the United States.

During his visit last Sunday, Mr. Obama urged Afghans to do more to fight corruption, which fuels the Taliban insurgency. But Mr. Obama also gave assurances of long-term American support and invited Mr. Karzai to visit Washington in May.

“In the Bush years, Karzai never talked of interference,” Afghan lawmaker Kabir Rangebar said. “Now the U.S. is looking very closely at Karzai.”