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Reuters

## Karzai outburst exposes Kabul's rift with West

By Peter Graff

04/02/2010

A blistering outburst by President Hamid Karzai on the West exposes a yawning rift between the veteran Afghan leader and the countries whose troops protect him, which could have serious consequences for the eight-year-old war.

Karzai has occasionally sniped at the Western countries that have 120,000 troops in Afghanistan, but his full-throated remarks on Thursday were unprecedentedly bitter and direct.

In a speech to election officials, he accused Western embassies of bribing and threatening officials, tampering with election results and conspiring to weaken the Afghan government.

"Foreigners will make excuses, they do not want us to have a parliamentary election," Karzai said. "They want parliament to be weakened and battered and for me to be an ineffective president, and for parliament to be ineffective."

In Washington, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley rejected accusations the West wanted to weaken Karzai, and said the United States wanted him take more steps against corruption.

The remarks follow a deterioration in the relationship on both sides and come days after an awkward visit by U.S. President Barack Obama, who arrived and left under cover of darkness and did not answer media questions in Karzai's presence.

Diplomats said that while they were taken aback by the high visibility and direct tone of Karzai's latest comments, they were not surprised to find themselves the butt of his attack.

"Karzai has been biting the hands that have been feeding him for some time. This is not a new pattern," said one Western diplomat in Kabul. "This was particularly visible, but he's been Western-bashing and U.S.-bashing for some time now."

Another diplomat described the remarks as a negotiating tactic to influence talks to resolve how a parliamentary election will be run this year, which could backfire by hurting support for the war in Western countries back home.

Karzai has tried to remove U.N. appointees from their majority position on an election fraud watchdog that threw out a third of his ballots during a presidential poll last year. The lower house of parliament voted on Wednesday to overrule him.

## OBAMA ADMINISTRATION COOL

But the tension goes deeper than a spat over electoral rules.

Karzai has had a frosty relationship with the Obama administration from the outset and it deteriorated late last year in the aftermath of his disputed presidential election.

U.S. ambassador Karl Eikenberry, in a classified cable that was later leaked, wrote in November that Karzai was "not an adequate strategic partner" and recommended against sending troop reinforcements unless Karzai implemented reforms.

Nevertheless, in December Obama re-committed to a counter-insurgency strategy to protect Karzai's government, and ordered 30,000 extra troops to the country this year.

So far this year, U.S. and Western officials have tried to play down their differences with Karzai in public, receiving him warmly at a conference in London in January.

They praised commitments he made to tackling corruption in his inauguration speech in November and hailed his decision to keep pro-Western ministers in some cabinet posts.

But Western frustration has since grown.

A promised anti-corruption crackdown has not materialized. Quietly, Karzai's government disclosed it had made a 2007 amnesty bill into law, granting immunity for war crimes to armed groups, a measure denounced by the United Nations.

Unlike his predecessor George W. Bush, who held video conferences with Karzai regularly, Obama has held only one video conference with the Afghan leader so far this year.

The lack of trust between Karzai and the West could directly hurt the campaign on the battlefield in coming months, when U.S. troops launch the war's biggest operation in the southern city of Kandahar, said Tim Ripley, who writes about defense for Jane's publications in Britain.

"The obvious problem is, the aim of counter-insurgency war is to win the population to the cause. And if you don't believe in the cause, it's difficult to sell it to the population," he said.

"They seem to be not having much confidence in the Afghan government, and the Afghan government doesn't have much confidence in us either."

In recent days, U.S. military officials have briefed reporters on the Kandahar operation, saying they would prefer to sideline Karzai's half-brother, the province's provincial council chief and most powerful man.

Karzai stands by his brother and is unlikely to accept any pressure to reduce his family's interests.

Karzai's main election opponent from last year, ex-foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, pounced on Karzai's remarks as a sign the president was losing his grip, even telling reporters he feared for Karzai's "well being."

Karzai's remarks were intended to be "populist, anti-foreigner," but would backfire at a time when he remains dependent on the West, where public support for aid to Afghanistan is fragile and flagging, Abdullah said.

"Look at the very, very small window of opportunity which is left -- which is the presence of the international community and they still have the commitment to help Afghanistan. And then you have a leader talking in that sense?" Abdullah told Reuters.