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Corruption in Kabul

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The Obama Administration cannot order Mr Karzai to resign. But it can make his continuation in office virtually impossible.

President Karzai's astonishingly crude attacks on the United States, less than a week after President Obama's first visit to Kabul, make patent the breakdown in relations between the two men. In a deliberately mendacious misreading of US policy and strategy in Afghanistan, Mr Karzai accused the West of perpetrating a "vast fraud" by trying to deny him victory in last year's presidential election. He said that Afghans would trust their leader only if he showed he was not a puppet. And he gave a warning that if "foreign pressure" continued, he might even join the Taleban.

His outburst is an insult to the 44 nations risking the lives of almost 100,000 troops to bring stability to his country. It provoked a cutting retort from the White House: Mr Karzai's comments were disturbing and "just not true", and would be ill received in Congress, where the Administration is seeking further funds for Afghanistan.

It is clear that the prickly and mercurial Afghan President was humiliated by Mr Obama's six-hour night-time visit and furious not only at being ordered to do more to confront the corruption in his Government but at the subsequent US disclosure of Mr Obama's frosty meeting. Mr Karzai knows that Afghans have an atavistic mistrust of foreigners and an instinctive resentment of foreign forces, however committed they are to ending the misery, poverty and violence that Afghans have endured for the past 30 years. Intent on countering the widespread contempt in which his Government is now held by those oppressed by corrupt officials, including the President's half-brother, Mr Karzai probably reckoned that he could bolster his waning prestige

by picking a quarrel with his Western backers, confident that Nato is too committed to his regime to engineer his removal.

He has, again, miscalculated. Washington has become ever more disenchanted with a man who so openly cheated during the election, who is undermining the strategy of the surge by urging talks with the Taleban leadership before it has been weakened and who has demonstrated the naivety of trying to build up Western-style democracy in a country that has known little but warlords, tribal feuding and religious extremism.

The US and its allies are not going to call Mr Karzai's bluff and quit. They are in Afghanistan not to underpin the President but to protect their own security and deny al-Qaeda sanctuary. A majority in the US, Britain and almost all other Nato countries favour a swift withdrawal — though not a surrender to the Taleban. But they are not committed to the survival of a president who has packed his Government with cronies, relatives and warlords. The Obama Administration cannot order Mr Karzai to resign. But it can make his continuation in office virtually impossible. Gordon Brown gave a salutary warning after the fraudulent first round of the presidential election that Mr Karzai could not count indefinitely on Nato's protection. Britain has lost many lives in Afghanistan. British troops admire the courage and determination of their Afghan colleagues. But they are not willing to risk more lives for a president who has only obloquy for their sacrifice.

Washington has made its frustration clear. The US wants changes in place by September, when Afghans vote for a new parliament. It now has a shrewd grasp of Afghanistan's tribal politics. Mr Karzai may soon find that, caught between the Taleban and Nato, he is eminently dispensable.