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A leader under siege speaks his mind

By Sonia Verma

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He's tired, bitter and paranoid, but above all, Hamid Karzai is deeply misunderstood.

That's the explanation offered by friends, associates and former aides of the Afghan President who spoke with The Globe and Mail this week about his erratic behaviour.

Western officials have condemned him for his conduct – blaming everything from delusion to drug addiction – but some of the Afghans who know him best offered an alternative analysis. Mr. Karzai has not fundamentally changed, they say, the West is simply judging him differently.

They paint an intimate portrait of a leader under siege, a temperamental President who rarely leaves his palace and is prone to lash out under pressure. "But he is the same leader he has always been," said a former member of his staff who requested anonymity so that he could speak freely. "He has never veered from his fundamental vision for the country, which has always been a joint vision."

Mr. Karzai's threat to join the Taliban and his charge that foreigners perpetrated a fraud that denied him outright victory in last summer's presidential election were typically theatrical, the former staffer said. "When he was popular and people liked him, they

appreciated the fact that he did not really respect protocol or follow a script,” he said. “It went down well. Nowadays it’s a big liability.”

Others see a strategic motive in Mr. Karzai’s outbursts against the United States and its allies, suggesting that they are aimed at erasing any perception in Afghanistan that he is a puppet of the West ahead of a planned peace jirga next month where he hopes to negotiate with insurgent groups to end the conflict in his country.

“He’s probably calculating that if he appoints himself the people’s spokesman, he’ll regain some of his lost legitimacy and shine,” said Janan Mosazai, a political analyst in Kabul.

A diplomat and long-time friend of Mr. Karzai concurred. “This is his biggest preoccupation. He thinks his biggest liability in any negotiations with the Taliban is the perception that he is weak and he is not taken seriously. ... He is trying to show that he is separate from the Americans, that he means what he is saying and if [the Taliban] talk to him and join the reconciliation process it’s not just empty words. He is not the Afghan face of an American enterprise.”

Analysts nevertheless agreed that Mr. Karzai is genuinely frustrated and harbours lingering resentment toward the West over last summer’s presidential election.

“Tied to Karzai’s frustration with the U.S. is that he genuinely believes they interfered with the elections,” said Grant Kippen, the former chair of Afghanistan’s Electoral Complaints Commission, which investigated the fraud in last summer’s presidential election. “By this, I mean that the U.S. did not back his candidacy last year ... a complete reversal from the unconditional support that [former U.S. president George W.] Bush and [former U.S. ambassador Zalmay] Khalilzad had provided him.”

Mr. Kippen, who spoke at length with Mr. Karzai on the telephone recently, said “there is a genuine belief in his mind that there are some people, people like [former UN deputy special representative for Afghanistan] Peter Galbraith and [U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan] Richard Holbrooke, and some others who want to get rid of him at any cost.”

Observers repeatedly noted how Mr. Karzai flourished during his first term as Afghan President. “Now Washington has him on a much shorter leash,” said a former member of his staff. “He doesn’t react well to that kind of pressure. He assumes people are out to get him. He is listening less and less to his advisers.”

Even Mr. Karzai’s most ardent supporters expressed dismay at his conduct, fearing consequences ranging from further political fallout to the withdrawal of Western military support.

The President’s shortcomings are becoming increasingly pronounced with stress and

time, analysts said. In many cases, it simply doesn't occur to him that his words resonate beyond the room in which he is speaking.

"When he faces an audience, he's totally absorbed and doesn't think that there is a global audience that hears him," a colleague said.

"He's temperamental. He always has been, and now he's more tired. He has been on the job for nine years and it has taken its toll," another said.

"He's always been a tribal politician," said Abdul Shakoor, an analyst in Kandahar, who cited Mr. Karzai's recent visit to the province as a prime example of his tendency to engage in doublespeak.

"He asked from the Kandahari people if they wanted a military operation in Kandahar. He wants to show them that he has the power to start the operation or stop it even though it isn't the full truth," he said.

While Washington's patience is wearing thin, Mr. Karzai believes there is nothing wrong with his behaviour, according to sources.

"For some reason, there is this perception on his part that internationals should just understand that this is the way he is. He thinks, 'If my intentions are good, they shouldn't have a reason to complain,'" said a source close to Mr. Karzai who is nonetheless worried by the President's attitude.

"He is being a bit fearless about whatever is going to happen to him, which is not the right thing. Because for a politician, the survival instinct is extremely important."