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by Kelley B. Vlahos, June 04, 2009



## The Unsinkable Hamid Karzai

When Afghan President Hamid Karzai swept into Washington last month he hardly presented the picture of a suppliant. He met with President Barack Obama with more aplomb than most, his signature Karakul hat never in hand, but firmly on his head.



Hamid Karzai (EPA)

And why shouldn't it be? After months of the Obama administration [undercutting](#) Karzai to the press, the old Pashtun finally had them licked. Through a Faustian dance of masterful if not crude deal-making in a political culture too Byzantine for most Americans to understand,

Karzai has [eliminated any legitimate opposition](#) to his presidency ahead of the August elections.

Not only that, but he's proven more fleet-footed than the new administration had given him credit for – mostly because Karzai has reportedly shored up support from potential rivals before Richard Holbrooke & Co. could get to them. The very people whom the administration believed could someday serve as a more effective stand-in for Karzai – or "the wounded lion," as reporter Jean MacKenzie was [calling him](#) as recently as January – have been [falling into line](#) faster than Joe Biden could say "soft partitioning plan."

Just a month ago, the *Washington Post* reported that the administration had already crafted a "strategy" to "maintain an arm's-length relationship with Karzai and will also seek to bypass Karzai by working more closely with other members of his cabinet and by funneling more money to local governors." Around the same time, MacKenzie, [who is reporting from Afghanistan](#) for GlobalPost.com, blogged that there were "persistent rumors that the United States is going to carve Afghanistan up into more manageable chunks, dealing with local strongmen rather than a central government."

"Some leaders have already been identified. None of this is official, of course, but names such as Ismail Khan, Gul Agha Sherzai, and Atta Mohammad Noor have been bandied about," wrote MacKenzie on May 6. "They will have their own budgets, their own relationship with Washington, their own power and influence. Karzai will be the president, but it is by no means clear what his constituency will look like. He used to be called 'the mayor of Kabul.' That may now become fact as well as perception."



Gul Agha Sherzai (EPA)

The whole prospect might invoke the word "Pollyannish," except we're talking about men like Gul Agha Sherzai, a.k.a. the "Bulldozer," who as former governor of Khandahar was accused of all sorts of corruption and human rights abuses. His Wikipedia entry says Sherzai's "rule was reputed to be exceptionally bloody and vicious, even by Afghan warlord standards." Nonetheless, he was slated to become a serious presidential contender until Karzai got to him for a reported four-hour meeting. He [dropped out of the race](#) on May 2.

Karzai apparently got to a few other candidates, too, resulting in surprising changes of heart by Western favorite Ali Ahmad Jalali and former finance minister Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi. Meanwhile, two powerful warlords have thrown in with Karzai as of this week: Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the Uzbek minority, and Mohammad Mohaqqiq, his Hazara counterpart, "a coup on the Afghan political chessboard," said Waheedullah Massoud for [AFP](#).

But experts on the region say it seems unrealistic to think the American administration had the power to engage in such a scheme anyway. "These people who are advising Obama know sh\*t about Afghanistan, Pashtuns, tribal customs, tribal loyalty," offered Pepe Escobar, a writer for the *Asia Times* and author of [Obama Does Globalistan](#). "[Karzai] was faster, smarter, and better."

One analyst for a private intelligence firm based in Washington said the administration was now "very clearly downgrading expectations of what it can achieve in Afghanistan and what it cannot," a direct result of the current tumult in neighboring Pakistan and the "realization that it wasn't a good idea, that they couldn't find the alternative" to Karzai they were seeking.

### **Searching for "the Strong Man"**

That hasn't stopped the administration from launching one trial (lead) balloon after another to find their Afghan "strong man" *à la* Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki.

Without Maliki's help in marshaling the authority of the central government against Sunni insurgent holdouts and effectively finishing off the ethnic cleansing and subsequent balkanization of Baghdad, the "success" of the so-called Surge would have never happened. Today, Maliki is reportedly holding together his fragile government through [increasingly authoritarian tactics](#), without a peep of American protest. Maliki did his part, and now Obama can say he is proceeding with promised troop withdrawals this summer.

The White House has no such hope for Karzai, thus the [strange New York Times piece](#) on May 20 suggesting that Zalmay "Zal" Khalilzad, former ambassador to Afghanistan and [longtime neoconservative stalwart](#), "has been talking with Mr. Karzai for several weeks about taking on a job that the two have described as the chief executive officer of Afghanistan."



Zalmay Khalilzad (Joel Saget/AFP)

The arrangement – actually picking up from Khalilzad's "viceroy" days from 2003 to 2005, when the Afghan-born American [helped secure the presidency for Karzai](#) on behalf of the Bush administration – would be beneficial to Obama's plans for Afghanistan, the story goes. According to experts quoted by the *Times*, "enlisting Mr. Khalilzad would have the virtue of bringing a strong, competent leader into an increasingly dysfunctional Afghan government" and "would provide the Obama administration with a strong conduit to push American interests in Afghanistan, particularly in cracking down on corruption and the drug trade."

While "a senior Obama administration official" was on hand to offer details, the administration "insisted that the United States was not behind the idea."

Now, depending on whom you talk to in Washington, Khalilzad is either a suave and brilliant diplomat or a Republican flunky who encouraged the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan *and* Iraq. But all would seem to agree that the plan would implode rather quickly if Khalilzad were seen as a tool of the U.S., which is almost inevitable.

"If Karzai, who is close to the U.S., is seen as a lackey of the U.S., then Khalilzad is even more so," said the private intelligence source. "If [Khalilzad] is being used, it shows that they really don't have a lot of good people to turn to."

From Rajiv Chandrasekaran in [the Washington Post](#):

*"In November 2003, as the U.S. engagement in Iraq was becoming more violent, the Bush administration dispatched Zalmay Khalilzad, its foremost expert on Afghanistan, as ambassador to Kabul.*

*"An animated former professor who speaks Dari and Pashto, the country's two principal languages, Khalilzad was far more than an ambassador. U.S. diplomats described his role as the country's chief executive – with Karzai as the figurehead chairman – for the 19 months of his ambassadorship.*

*"Khalilzad ate dinner six nights a week at the presidential palace. No significant decision was made by Karzai in that time without Khalilzad's involvement. 'Khalilzad's approach fundamentally weakened Karzai,' said a veteran Western diplomat. 'Karzai was seen by many Afghans as a puppet of the Americans. It delegitimized him.'"*

So what's in it for Karzai? Cover, while the hard-charging Khalilzad "cracks down" on narco-warlords and corruption? Is there a deal he can't refuse?

Considering that Khalilzad's insertion into the process would be seen as a US attempt to sideline Karzai, this scenario seems unlikely. The newspaper suggested that Karzai would in fact be defusing a "potential rival" by agreeing to this, but it also noted that rumors Khalilzad might run for president went nowhere anyway. Inviting a Washington agent back into his role as "viceroys" can hardly be seen as defusing anything.

Once the *Times* story broke, Khalilzad denied any such plans were ever in the works.

### **Win-Lose-Lose**

Hamid Karzai is indeed an inheritance from the Bush administration, which seated the man and helped enshrine his authority through a new Afghan constitution that Khalilzad helped to write. Bush then turned his gaze to Iraq, while Karzai and his growing orbit of courtiers began funneling foreign aid and drug money into their [poppy palaces](#). Meanwhile, the rest of Afghanistan plummeted further into poverty and despair.

Outside of Kabul, the Taliban have taken back the levers of power, and any gains in human rights have in turn faded with the shifting sands.

Karzai's quiet victory over the Obama administration's attempt to undermine him would be satisfying if he were good for Afghanistan, but his record says otherwise. Meanwhile, Obama's attempt to find a "strong man" is leading him straight to feudal despots, court scoundrels, and Bush administration throwbacks as the alternative.

It's a win-lose-lose situation: a win for Karzai, who gets to keep his throne; a loss for Obama, who cannot pursue his lofty goal of stability, rebuilding, and a ["tolerant and open, democratically elected government"](#) while Karzai or any of these other dangerous and venal men are in power; and a loss for the people – American and Afghan alike – who will continue to watch billions of dollars and perennial promises for a hopeful future swirl down a drain.