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A Karzai Victory Is Just the Ticket for Regional Commanders

By Griff Witte

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MAZAR-E SHARIF - President Hamid Karzai is considered a strong favorite to win reelection when Afghans go to the polls this summer. But here in northern Afghanistan, one of the country's most peaceful regions, there is little doubt who will be in control when the elections are over, and it's not Karzai.



Rather, it is the same men who have ruled this territory off and on for decades, regional commanders who have divvied up the land into personal fiefdoms and transformed central government institutions, including the police, into instruments of their will.

With two months to go until the vote, most of these commanders -- critics call them warlords -- are lining up to endorse the president's reelection bid. Analysts say that if Karzai secures another term, the commanders who supported the president are likely to be rewarded with a guarantee of

continued power.

The enduring influence of these strongmen reflects the fragility of the U.S.-backed government, which remains a government in name only across vast stretches of the country, even those not beset by Taliban insurgency. Indeed, the commanders' loyalty to the president seems to owe less to Karzai's strength as a leader than to his weakness.

"Who else would they support? They've lived a life of luxury under his government," said Golalai Nur Safi, a member of parliament who represents an area just outside Mazar-e Sharif, a desert metropolis on the Central Asian plains. "They see personal advantage in supporting him."

Safi is backing Karzai's reelection because she thinks he "is a good man who has a bad team" and because she sees no viable alternative. She is an outspoken critic of the commanders and of Karzai's pattern of caving in to their demands whenever he wants to shore up his position.

It was clearly illustrated this spring when Karzai picked two regional strongmen to serve as his running mates. The selection of one in particular, Mohammed Fahim, rankled critics. It was a direct reversal of Karzai's decision before the 2004 election to dump from his ticket the much-feared Tajik commander, who was then considered so power-hungry that U.S. officials worried he would launch a coup.

At the time, purging Fahim from the government was hailed as a watershed decision by the president to take a stand against Afghanistan's decades-long tradition of warlordism. Now, it strikes many observers as a rare moment of courage amid a much longer record of appeasing a rogues' gallery of human rights abusers.

"Where we stand today with the political landscape is not much different from where we started, and in some respects it's looking even worse," said Ahmad Nader Nadery, head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. "These so-called leaders are able to tell the disillusioned people that there's no other way, that 'we have access to the president, and you have to listen to us.' "

A Karzai spokesman, Hamid Zada, defended his leader's vice presidential picks as a way of bringing reconciliation to the long-fractured country. In a nation bitterly divided by ethnicity, Karzai's ticket includes a Pashtun (himself), a Tajik (Fahim) and a Hazara (Karim Khalili). "The president makes all his decisions based on the national unity of Afghanistan," Zada said.

The selections, he added, are also intended to pay tribute to the millions of Afghans who resisted Soviet occupation during the 1980s. "Fahim and Khalili represent a significant group of Afghans who fought the Soviets and paid the price," he said.

Karzai himself has never been a commander. Before his selection to lead Afghanistan in December 2001, he was a tribal chief and a diplomat who was known for his ability to mediate conflicts, not order men into battle.

In Afghanistan, where anyone younger than 30 has known only war and where the man with the

most guns usually calls the shots, Karzai's lack of military bona fides is considered a liability. His Western backers -- the United States most particularly -- have encouraged his ties to the regional commanders to bolster his rule as the government combats a vicious Taliban insurgency.

The logic is that commanders who support the government and who inspire fierce loyalty among their followers can be useful in maintaining the security of areas that might otherwise be vulnerable to instability. By some measures, the strategy may have worked: Afghanistan's north and west, where the commanders are strongest, have also been the safest regions of the country.

But Karzai's reliance on the commanders has undeniably stunted the government's development, limiting its ability to extend its reach beyond Kabul, the capital. Afghanistan's central government has struggled throughout history to assert itself, with little success. The result has been a power vacuum filled by local leaders, most of whom are heavily subsidized by foreign governments that need vehicles through which to exert their influence in Afghanistan.

The enduring strength of the commanders has bred resentment among Afghans who see their government favoring the interests of the powerful. That has happened before: When the Taliban swept to power in the 1990s, deep disillusionment with the commanders' reign was a major reason why.

Ashraf Ghani, the technocratic former finance minister who is running against the president, said Karzai's choice of allies would backfire, arguing that after three decades of subjugation by men who have delivered no improvement in people's lives, Afghans have grown tired of the warlords.

"These people are not what they used to be," he said.

Many of the commanders are notorious for their brutality: One Karzai backer, the Uzbek strongman Abdurrashid Dostum, once ordered hundreds of prisoners packed into metal shipping crates, then left them to suffocate under the hot desert sun, human rights groups have reported.

Dostum has been in Turkey for six months but is not expected to stay away. Despite vocal criticism of Karzai over the years, Dostum has endorsed the president and is widely thought to be angling for control over Mazar-e Sharif after the election. This city, one of Afghanistan's largest, used to be Dostum's territory. He was pushed out by a rival commander, Attah Mohammed, several years ago and has wanted to get back in ever since.

The election could be his ticket. Mohammed is thought to be backing a Karzai challenger, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, a gamble that could cost him the governorship of this province if Abdullah loses.

Technically, Mohammed is a Karzai appointee who represents the central government. In reality, locals say, Mohammed takes few cues from Kabul. Although all private militias were supposed to be disarmed years ago under an internationally mandated program, Mohammed retains an arsenal of tens of thousands of weapons, according to officials here.

Dostum and others have also maintained their arsenals, according to Gen. Mohammed Ali Razai, deputy police commander for northern Afghanistan.

"The people who had weapons in the past, they didn't hand them over. They still have their weapons, and they use them to their advantage," Razai said.

The internationally trained and funded Afghan National Police, he indicated, is still too small and is ill-equipped to challenge the commanders' power.

Residents say that the police are a problem and that many have been co-opted by Mohammed.

A local Pashtun tribal elder, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he said his life is under threat, accused Mohammed of using the police to silence critics and to persecute ethnic minorities, especially Pashtuns. The elder said the police have killed Pashtun leaders who challenge the authority of Mohammed, who is Tajik. He said the police then falsely claim that the dead Pashtuns were Taliban.

"These warlords have killed thousands of Muslims. Their hands are covered with the blood of innocent people," the elder said. "We have suffered for 30 years under these warlords, and we are suffering still."