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Karzai seeks to fill power void after brother's death

By Joshua Partlow

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To fill the void left by the assassination of his half-brother in the southern province of Kandahar and halt the erosion of his family's power in the region, President Hamid Karzai is considering a reshuffle of senior government officials, according to U.S. and Afghan officials.

Among the possibilities being discussed is naming Gul Agha Sherzai, currently governor of eastern Nangahar province, to replace Toryalai Wesa as the new governor of Kandahar, the officials said. Sherzai, a former Kandahar governor, is a towering national figure and could fill Karzai's need for a strong ally in the southern city where the Taliban took root and which his brother Ahmed Wali Karzai dominated until he was killed in his home last week.

Rumors of Afghan political shuffles are common and often do not pan out. But the killing of Ahmed Wali Karzai, followed closely by the slaying of a former southern governor and presidential adviser, Jan Mohammad, has weakened the president's position in the south.

President Karzai relied on his brother's help to mobilize his fellow ethnic Pashtuns in the last presidential election; Ahmed Wali Karzai's vast financial and political sway made him the preeminent power broker in the region, where the U.S. military has concentrated its counterinsurgency campaign in recent years.

A spokesman for President Karzai, Waheed Omer, said that he could not confirm or deny whether Sherzai would move to Kandahar but that "reshuffling is an ordinary thing." A Sherzai

spokesman also declined to discuss the issue. Other Afghan and U.S. officials said they consider the appointment likely.

“His absence has created a vacuum, and hopefully that could be remedied,” said Qayoom Karzai, another brother of the president.

The appointment of Sherzai to the Kandahar post would not be without political risk, observers say. Although Sherzai is widely seen as a supporter of the Karzai family — he attended Ahmed Wali Karzai’s funeral and called him a “blessed martyr and patriot” — his Barekzai tribe has competed for power and NATO contracts with the Popalzais, the Karzai family tribe.

“I don’t see Karzai letting him go down there,” said a U.S. official with considerable experience in Kandahar who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive political issue candidly. “He won’t really be trusted by the Karzai family. He will always be seen as a rival with an independent agenda.”

Sherzai has been accused of improperly profiting off the customs duties at the Torkham border crossing in the Khyber Pass. His family has also grown wealthy by securing contracts for construction and maintenance of Kandahar Air Field, a NATO military base.

Ahmed Wali Karzai’s actual government job, a relatively minor position as head of the provincial council, is not the issue. Working from his home, he had the ability to intimidate opponents and reward allies — as well as gain the support of U.S. military and intelligence officials — making him more powerful than Wesa, his ostensible superior.

“The governor several months back said to the president that he wanted to resign,” said Zalmai Ayoubi, Wesa’s spokesman, adding that he knew nothing about his boss’s rumored departure now. The search for a new power broker is potentially damaging to American efforts in Kandahar, the U.S. official said.

“What we should really be doing is searching for a rebalancing or redistribution of power,” the official said. “Americans love to have a lever, they love to have a go-to guy, they love to have an executive officer. It’s this tendency that helped create a lot of these power brokers.”

The day of the burial, President Karzai chose another brother, Shah Wali Karzai, as the new leader of the Popalzai tribe. Shah Wali Karzai lived in the same house as Ahmed Wali Karzai and is expected to continue using the home as a meeting place for residents and politicians.

But few in Kandahar expect that Shah Wali Karzai, a businessman, can the powerful man [EPA] match his slain brother’s influence in the near term. Although Ahmed Wali Karzai’s activities ran the gamut — helping U.S. military and intelligence officials fight the Taliban, ruling on tribal and political disputes and, his critics allege, profiting off the drug trade — Shah Wali Karzai has kept a lower profile.

“He stayed away from politics,” said Mahmood Karzai, another brother. “It will take him a while to get used to things.”

Shah Wali Karzai, who could not be reached for comment, graduated from the University of Maryland with two bachelor of science degrees, in mechanical engineering in 1988 and civil engineering in 1991. In Kandahar, he has worked alongside Mahmood Karzai on the massive Ayno Mena development, a partly built, gated development to include upscale homes, shops, mosques, man-made lakes, fountains and a hotel.

“He should try hard to know who is who. He should build the trust of the people,” Haji Agha Lalai Destegeri, a provincial council member, said of Shah Wali Karzai. And, he warned, he should be careful. “Everyone will want to get that power.”