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Karzai in His Labyrinth

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On a sunny June morning in Kabul, I sat among hundreds of turbaned men from Afghanistan's Helmand and Kandahar provinces in a chandeliered wedding hall where they had gathered for a campaign rally to re-elect President Hamid Karzai. War was raging in Helmand and Kandahar. And yet there was an atmosphere of burlesque about the place. Waiters hammed up their service, skidding across the floor balancing mounds of rice, bananas and chicken, whirling shopping carts of Coke and Fanta. The organizer of the event and master of ceremonies was none other than Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, the five-foot-tall ex-governor of Helmand and probably the country's most infamous drug trafficker. From a velvet couch he barked out to the speakers: "Not so many poems! Keep your speeches short!" — but no one was listening.

At my table, an elderly Helmandi engineer described how awful things were in his region — families killed in coalition airstrikes, villages overrun by the Taliban. So why more Karzai? "If we choose someone else, it will only get worse," he said through an interpreter. Another man said that at least Karzai had brought education and unity. "They are all lying," a third said in English. He was the son of a prominent Kandahari elder who, a year before, was assassinated outside the family's house. He'd also lost his uncle, brother and 45 other members of his extended family, he told me. He blamed the government. He was shaking his head at the spectacle in the wedding hall. "I told the men at my table, 'You just came to show your faces on camera so if Karzai wins he will give you privileges.' " He laughed and said, "They told me they just came for lunch." I asked what he thought would happen during the election in Kandahar. "Fraud," he said. He himself claimed to have made 8,000 fake voter-registration cards. They were selling for $20.

After lunch, in a downstairs room filled with mannequins in pink and green wedding gowns, I had a chat with Akhundzada, the ex-governor. He is campaigning in the south for Karzai. First he wanted to explain that the nine tons of drugs found in his compound in 2005 were planted there by the British to frame him. Then he changed tack: "If people think I was a smuggler, O.K. But at least I spent the money on government and soldiers! Now the money

goes to the Taliban and kills British and Americans and Afghan soldiers." This is the same logic that Karzai used to try to get Akhundzada reinstalled as governor of Helmand. The British would not accept it. This seemed distinctly unfair to Akhundzada, given the other characters on the political stage: "They don't take Fahim out of elections? Dostum is not criminal? Mohaqiq is not criminal? Just me?"

It was a comical and sinister and telling performance — a prominent Karzai backer damning key members of the president's re-election team (locally dubbed "the warlord ticket"). The ethnic-Tajik Muhammad Fahim is running as Karzai's first vice president (having previously served in the same post and as defense minister); the ethnic-Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum is returning from Turkey to deliver Uzbek votes to Karzai; and the ethnic-Hazara politician Muhammad Mohaqiq is a key Karzai ally to whom Karzai pledged five ministerial posts.

"I swear," Akhundzada went on, eyes agog, "I have not killed a cat in all my life." With that he took off with his rifle-toting guards and disappeared into his armored S.U.V.

Karzai applauds himself for his big-tent, forgive-and-forget approach. But his opponents are thrashing him for it. "If the goal is to consolidate a group of drug dealers as the government of Afghanistan so that you have relative peace, then what is the vision?" asked Ashraf Ghani when we met at his gracious villa on the southwestern edge of Kabul in February, a few months before he decided to run for president himself. "Is that what the 20-year-old girl who wants to become a computer engineer or doctor has in mind? Or the 22-year-old Afghan who won two gold medals in computers? Can they become stakeholders in an Afghanistan run by Sher Muhammad Akhundzada?"

The presidential campaign has put Karzai's style of politics on trial. There are 41 candidates running in Afghanistan's second-ever presidential elections, which take place on Aug. 20. Karzai's main competitors are two of his former ministers — Ghani, who was finance minister from 2002 to 2004 and an adviser to the World Bank for 10 years; and Abdullah Abdullah, an ophthalmologist who became a close adviser to the legendary mujahedin commander Ahmed Shah Massoud (assassinated by Al Qaeda just before the 9/11 attacks) and served as foreign minister under Karzai until 2006. When I asked Abdullah what he'd do to stop drug smuggling, he said, "I wouldn't let my brother touch it." He was referring to Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's half-brother, who is accused of running Kandahar like a mafia don and overseeing one of the local drug cartels. "Seriously, you lose your legitimacy if the perception is that your brother is doing it and benefiting from millions of dollars."

Ghani, on his Web site, has branded the Karzais a mafia family, "Karzai Incorporated." "The largest threat to Afghanistan now is this government," he told me recently. "Just take one figure: last fiscal year from March 2007 to 2008, the Ministry of Finance collected 40 billion Afghanis, which is equivalent to around $800 million. The same ministry declares that the real revenue should have been 120 billion Afghanis. They are acknowledging that, due to corruption, 80 billion is being lost." That, he said, worked out to $1.6 billion. "We go beg the entire world: 'Please give us budget support; we need to pay our poor teachers and civil servants.' If the revenue was collected we wouldn't have needed a cent from the international community for the budget."

Does Karzai care? Is this what he wants? "I don't think so," Ghani said. "But I don't judge a president by his desires. I judge a president by his record and his company. We ranked 117

on Transparency International in 2005. Now we rank 176, the fifth-most-corrupt country on earth. It happened under his watch. And then he wants to run for office for another five years? Based on what? And the team he put together: isn't it a declaration of war against the people of Afghanistan?"

Over the winter I spent several days in the presidential palace, the Arg, with Karzai and his entourage. I was hoping to find out who Karzai really is. Does he condone the venality of his friends and family? Is he unable to stop it? Is this just what life is in a country long torn by war? Did the West misjudge his character — or did it make it impossible for him to rule? Is he just in love with power and pomp? And why, with all the accusations of criminality, the unfulfilled promises, his plummeting popularity, would Hamid Karzai even want to run again?

I put this last question to him on a gloomy afternoon over tea at the Arg palace, where he lives and works and is confined much of the year. The question appeared to stump him. He said he had tried and failed to find a suitable replacement. Then he said, in his practiced English: "I don't know what happened. I decided to run." Then he said: "Look, I will tell you. But then I'll leave it up to you whether you want to print it or not." I was expecting some shocking revelation. But instead he fumbled about and said, "When needed, my extreme toughness with our allies is an asset I want the Afghan people to have if they choose so." And, "The second reason, I don't know how to put this. . . . I feel for the Afghan people, and they know that." It all sounded so cryptic. As his train of thought neared its destination, he suddenly said: "I'm a very, very, very simple person. I have no property. I have no money. I have no love for luxury. If I find someone tomorrow that will combine all these three. . . . " He sighed and took a deep breath. "I'm an exhausted person. I've not begun this seven years ago. I've begun this when I was 22. I've not had a private life since then. I deserve one. I long for one." He lingered on the O of his longing. "The moment I get this choice, I would leave."

It was clear that Karzai believes in the image he has fashioned of himself as protector and father of the Afghan nation. Or does he? Karzai is a theatrical man — a ham, even — funny and charming. He flourished in the adulation of his early years as head of state, when the fashion designer Tom Ford dubbed him the chicest man on the planet. His theatrical qualities have carried him along for some time. But what he actually believes is often hard to pin down. And lately the wear and tear of performance is beginning to show, like the creases in a fading diva. His friends told me he has health problems. He's skin and bones. He always has a cold or a cough and takes effervescent vitamin-C tablets compulsively, which he did as we spoke. "He is stressed, short of patience, short of temper," a friend said. He snaps easily. Promotes flatterers. Kills the messenger. Hugs his enemies. Abuses his friends. And his twitching eye — a nervous tic, they say — is unusually active.

Still, Karzai seems to feel he has a mission. Friends say he knows how bad his reputation is and wants to redeem his legacy. When I asked who his role model is, he said without hesitation, "Gandhi." Ever since his days as a university student in India he has been fascinated by the man's life and his ideas of nonviolent liberation. Karzai clearly abhors violence. Tears came to his eyes whenever we spoke about civilian casualties. He once had an aide, in the middle of the night, go buy back a child bride whose parents had given her away to repay a debt. Karzai and his aristocratic Pashtun family revere Ghaffar Khan, the nonviolent Pashtun leader who lived from 1890 to 1988. Through his charisma and belief in education, Ghaffar Khan mobilized a pacific movement known as the Red Shirts, first against the British and then against Pakistan. It was a remarkable feat, given the warrior nature of the

Pashtun tribesmen. Khan became known as the “frontier Gandhi.”

Gandhi is also a model for Karzai, he told me, in terms of tolerance. “You can’t imagine how much I’ve tolerated,” he said, glaring from under his brow and leaning into his desk where he keeps two photographs, one of his 2-year-old son, Mirwais, and the other of the late King Zahir Shah. “I was like a person carrying a very delicate jar, a vase, in my hands, a very precious, delicate one that is so valuable that you don’t want it to drop, and you are walking through storms, through rains, through wind, through excesses of all kinds,” he said, elongating his vowels and carrying himself away in the drama of his metaphor. “You fall but you keep the vase, delicately holding it so it doesn’t break. That’s how Afghanistan was,” he said. “Carrying it for so long you have to be very accommodating. That weakens you.”

What accommodations? The warlords? The foreigners?

“Everything,” he said. “Everything, everything, everything! I had to balance the U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan. I had to balance other countries in here. I had to balance Europe. I had to balance the Muslim world. I had to make Afghanistan a country where all work together for it. And that I have managed. Fortunately. But, you know, at great personal stress and cost.”

The cost? Loneliness. A man painted into a corner. Every day he wakes to another round of punches from the world’s diplomats and news media. He studies the press clippings, CNN, the BBC, the local news channels, ravenously and angrily. They blame him and his brothers and his ministers for the country’s corruption, for the insurgency eating away at the nation, for running a narco-state (in Hillary Clinton’s phrase) and even for the food shortages facing eight million Afghans. In January, when Karzai lashed out at one of his vice presidents in a cabinet meeting, accusing him of conspiring with foreigners, then threatened to go to the mountains to fight the invaders himself, word went around that Karzai was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

It wasn’t hard to see why. “No one is on his side,” a foreign observer told me with mild pity. “He’s trapped in the palace, trapped by his family.” When a bomb went off at the German Embassy in January, all the windows of his house were blown out. “And little Mirwais,” he said, “was running around the house going bam-bam-bang-bang! Nobody had told Karzai. He was in his office. He got home and they were mending the windows.”

The president’s residence sits within the Arg palace grounds along a tree-lined path behind the Gul Khanna (the House of Flowers), where Karzai has his office. At the end of the workday, the president takes a brisk 10-minute walk. When I followed after him one cold evening, 10 men or more covered him as he walked along. His cellphone rang. He slipped aside. The men tried to stay near. Assassins have repeatedly tried to kill Karzai. A bullet just missed him in Kandahar in 2002. In 2007, he was rocketed during a speech in Ghazni, between Kabul and Kandahar — but he stayed onstage. He insisted on holding an Independence Day parade last year despite security warnings. And sure enough, a well-trained hit squad fired on the parade, killing several officials and narrowly missing the president. For the last two years security has been so tight, friends say, that the president is getting what they call the Arg syndrome. Sometimes at night he has been known to slip out of the palace with a bodyguard in a beat-up car just to drive around Kabul and see what’s going on. He will express surprise, delight, even, at the new buildings and sights.

I recently asked an old friend of Karzai’s why Karzai would choose as his running mate

Muhammad Fahim, a controversial figure who has been accused of multiple human rights abuses over many years. “Karzai believes that his two greatest mistakes as president were the removals of Sher Muhammad Akhundzada and Marshal Fahim,” he said. Both happened under intense Western pressure. The reason he regretted their removal was not that he thought they were honest statesmen but that he found they were more trouble out of office. Fahim’s removal lost him mujahedin support, and Akhundzada’s removal triggered the fall of Helmand Province to the Taliban.

To understand why everyone was so shocked that Karzai chose Fahim as his running mate, you need to know a little of the personal history between the two men. It shows how warlordism does and doesn’t work — and, in a sense, what Karzai will forgive to stay in power. Back in 1994, the mujahedin factions who fought off the Soviets were supposed to be cooperating in a coalition government. Instead they were deep in a civil war, rocketing one another and Kabul to smithereens.

One of these factions belonged to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, today an outlawed insurgent but then prime minister and head of a large, mostly ethnic-Pashtun political party. Another belonged to the man who was then Afghanistan’s president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of a largely Tajik party. In this government, Karzai was deputy foreign minister and trying, as is his wont, to play conciliator between the factions. But Rabbani and his men began to suspect that Karzai was plotting something with Hekmatyar. Rabbani’s head of intelligence was none other than Muhammad Fahim. Karzai was hauled into an interrogation center in Kabul from which few returned alive. But just as the interrogation got under way, a rocket slammed into the roof of the building. Karzai fled to Pakistan.

In 1996, after the Taliban captured Kabul and threw out the mujahedin factions, Karzai briefly considered becoming an ambassador for the Taliban government. After all, the Taliban were mostly, like Karzai, Kandahari Pashtuns; he knew many of them. But the position went to someone else. From that time until 2001, he joined a broad coalition of friends and enemies seeking a grand loya jirga, or tribal council, to bring peace to Afghanistan.

With the overthrow of the Taliban, the ethnic Tajiks who made up the bulk of the Northern Alliance considered themselves the victors. At the Bonn Conference held in Germany in December 2001 to create the future Afghan government, the Northern Alliance Tajiks demanded and got the most important ministries. Given Afghanistan’s demographics, everyone knew they needed an ethnic Pashtun as president, and Abdullah Abdullah, who was then with the Northern Alliance, pressed the case for Karzai. He seemed the perfect choice at the time, Abdullah recently told me: a Pashtun from a landed family in Kandahar, known to the Northern Alliance through years of jihad and then various peace processes. “After fighting all those years against the Taliban, who were a southern Pashtun movement,” Abdullah told me recently, “for the north to push for someone from the south was breaking the ice and a milestone that we could build a future on.”

Karzai’s personal tale didn’t hurt. Two weeks after 9/11, he hopped on the back of a friend’s motorcycle in Quetta, Pakistan, and journeyed into the Taliban-infested Afghan mountains to persuade the tribes to revolt. He had no gunmen with him. Just a satellite phone from the C.I.A. and faith in his powers of persuasion. He and the men he gathered were chased by the Taliban but fought them off. “They called for help to the C.I.A.,” recalls Jason Amerine, who was a Special Forces captain assigned to make contact with Karzai. Navy Seals landed,

pulled Karzai and tribal leaders out and flew them to a base in Pakistan. Even then, Karzai understood that appearances mean everything in a part of the world where conspiracy is taken as truth. He was willing to fudge the facts to seal the legend of his heroism. Live on the BBC, he insisted he was somewhere in Afghanistan. In fact, he was with Amerine in Pakistan. Nevertheless he did persuade the very reluctant Americans to help him return to Taliban land. "Karzai was such a dark horse in all this that there was no real reason for anyone to risk it," Amerine said. "He had no guys in the south. His plan was very idealistic: 'If we show up, the south will rise.' " In the end, Afghans did rise against the Taliban, including in the south. Karzai was right. And his legend stuck.

So it was that on a cold December evening in 2001, Hamid Karzai flew from Kandahar to Kabul to become the interim leader of the new Afghanistan. He had just a few men with him, including his uncle Aziz and his younger half-brother, Shawali, when he stepped onto the tarmac. There to greet him was Fahim, brow furrowed, as it always is, along with more than a hundred of his soldier-bodyguards.

"Where are all your men?" he asked Karzai.

"You are my men," Karzai said to Fahim and his band of Northern Alliance fighters. "All of you who are Afghans are my men."

Fahim was stunned. No tribesmen? No bodyguards? No soldiers? A civilian leader all alone? A southern Pashtun aristocrat putting himself in the hands of the Tajik northerners? Karzai entrusting his life to his former tormentor? It was a gesture of infinite faith.

From that day onward, Fahim became a thorn in Karzai's side, always reminding Karzai that his life depended on him. After Karzai's Pashtun vice president, Haji Qadir, was assassinated in July 2002, Karzai so distrusted Fahim's bodyguards (Fahim was then in charge of the army) that he accepted protection from U.S. forces. Cabinet meetings featured regular clashes between the so-called warlords on one hand and the technocrats — or dogwashers, as the educated Afghan returnees were known — on the other. In particular, men like Fahim and Ashraf Ghani (then minister of finance) were at each other's throats. And Karzai was once again in the middle.

Zia Mojadedi, an old friend of Karzai's and now the ambassador to Poland, put much of the blame for the dysfunctional cabinet on the international community. "Most of the NATO members have a gentleman in the cabinet," he told me. "Each one defends his own man. And those who make donations are the ones deciding. So he was confused." One famous example is Dostum, the Uzbek warlord from the north. After he beat up and detained a political rival, he drank himself into a wild state and, in King Kong fashion, took up a position on the roof of his garish mansion in Kabul, baiting the police and vowing that they'd never take him alive. Karzai wanted to arrest him. But the Turks, who are major donors and are ethnically related to the Uzbeks, vehemently opposed the move. Finally a deal was worked out for Dostum to go for some rest and rehab in Turkey.

For years everyone was telling Karzai to get rid of Zarar Ahmad Muqbil, his minister of the interior, whom senior U.N. officials accused of taking kickbacks from organized-crime rings within the ministry. But the Americans loved him on account of the glowing reports submitted by his American mentor. The internationals referred to her as "Rosa Klebb," after the infamous Russian counterintelligence agent in the Ian Fleming novel "From Russia With

Love," who sported a venom-laden dart in her shoe. Even Karzai used to tease Muqbil, saying to him, "How is your godmother?"

"In a microcosm, the problem with the whole of Afghanistan was Muqbil," says Jawed Ludin, Karzai's former chief of staff, who watched the whole fiasco with Zarar Muqbil unfold firsthand. "To what extent do you blame Karzai? On the one hand, the British ambassador and friends would tell him Zarar was incompetent and should be removed. On the other, the American would praise him and say he's doing a fine job. And the Americans were the largest donor to police reform."

Karzai told me, "I was a president without any resources directly in my control." It was a defensive response, but it was also true. According to one palace official: "Early as 2003, in discussions with Donald Rumsfeld, Karzai would say: 'Look, we cannot live with this situation, when you think I am the president, but I am not. We cannot leave Dostum in the north, Shirzai in Kandahar, Ismail Khan in Herat.' And you know what Rumsfeld said? 'Look, Mr. President, they are our friends, and we do not want a green-on-green situation.' I didn't know this phrase then." Green on green: friendly soldier against friendly soldier.

Later that year, Karzai threatened to resign if the warlords who were hogging all the customs revenue didn't turn their dividends over to the central government. A compromise was reached: the first of many. Karzai began to make peace, accommodating jihadis, Communists, technocrats, dogwashers, war criminals, democrats. All had a place in Karzai's big tent. The next two years could be called Karzai's honeymoon period. Two pillars were essential to his stability — Lakhdar Brahimi, the wise old Algerian resistance leader and diplomat who headed up the U.N. mission, and Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American steeped in the traditions both of Afghan tribal horse-trading and American bureaucracy. They could help Karzai make tough decisions and back them up with American muscle.

Then, in 2004, he won the first presidential elections ever held in Afghanistan. Brahimi and Khalilzad left — and by 2005, most of the reformers around Karzai either walked away or were not invited back into his cabinet. Among those who left was Ashraf Ghani. "In 2005, Karzai could have taken the country in any direction he wished," Ghani told me. "His legitimacy knew no bounds." What happened? "He failed to lead," Ghani said.

Or maybe he led the only way he knew how. At heart, Karzai is a Pashtun tribal leader, just like his father was. What are the responsibilities of the tribal leader? To protect his property (livestock and women), his land and his people. If one of your people is put in jail, whether he lays mines, steals or murders, you're obliged to get him out and let the tribe deal with him. If the law helps your case, great. If not, tradition will do. That tradition is evident all over the campaign trail, where Karzai has even released criminals from prison so they can campaign for him.

When Karzai's father was killed in Pakistan in 1999, his family and tribesmen decided that, because his older brothers were living in America, Hamid would take over as a leader of the tribe and, in keeping with tradition, they placed the turban on his head. When he assumed the presidency, he took what he knew from tribal leadership and applied it to his method of rule. He sees himself as the tribal leader of all Afghans. As such he's the last resort for those seeking to rectify injustice. "In his dream he is a king," one friend says.

Other close friends of Karzai describe his leadership style as a kind of three-card monte

where you never know which card will appear. One card is tribal. “His father was head of the tribe, and in tribal culture you depend on loyalty of individuals rather than institutions,” said Ali Jalali, his former interior minister and a friend from refugee days in Pakistan. “You always try to be a patron to people close and loyal to you.” The second is the factional politics of resistance in Peshawar, where mujahedin leaders organized their resistance to the Soviet occupation. “Jihadi politics is mostly wheeling, dealing, no strategy, all tactical,” Jalali continued. “Please people here. Break promises there.” And the third is democracy. He cherishes the values of democracy but has no faith in its institutions. “How he reconciles these competing demands creates his style of leadership,” Jalali said. In reality, said another friend, “he sees human rights, freedom of the press, the law, the constitution as chains around his hands and legs.”

He is in his element playing Solomon, hosting elders for lunch in the palatial dining hall. They request a dam or a road or the release from custody of a tribesman accused of terrorism or kidnapping. If they are important politically — and, in the case of a prisoner, can vouch for his future behavior — Karzai often agrees, in kingly fashion.

He resists looking deeply into the consequences of his decisions. Last year, Karzai’s wife, Zeenat, a gynecologist, saw a report on television about the rape of a very young girl and her family’s futile quest for justice. Karzai was horrified. He had the police and prosecutor fired. He put the fight against rape on the national agenda.

Not long after, the other Karzai, the political animal, meddled in an obscure case in which a woman named Sara was raped by three men who were brothers. The evidence was overwhelming, and the brothers’ conviction was upheld to the highest court. But Karzai issued a decree releasing them. Sara went mad, and her husband was murdered.

I asked Karzai in February: “Why did you do that?”

“The story turned out to be different,” he said. He couldn’t remember the details and asked an aide to look into it.

In fact, the brothers reported to a local strongman, Mawlawi Islam, who was a member of Parliament and an important ally of Karzai’s. Islam’s son, who works in the Arg palace, told me that he had asked the palace staff to examine the case. The palace’s administrative office then developed another story — told to Karzai, and later to me — claiming Sara’s rape never took place and adding that her son had raped the wife of one of the convicted brothers. It became so convoluted that Karzai probably didn’t know the details. Still, he signed a decree releasing the brothers in the name of Islamic mercy for their mother.

“We have a saying, When you come to power your eyes go blind, your ears go deaf and you don’t know anything anymore,” an old Kandahari friend of the president’s told me.

Hence, perhaps, Karzai’s willful blindness about what his own brothers are up to. In explaining Karzai’s relationship to his brothers, Karzai’s family and friends allude to his outcast childhood — of the seven sons, he was not one of his father’s favorites, they say. “The mad one,” that’s how his father called him. The pet name stuck. A quiet boy, a dreamer, an odd one who could scare the other boys with his strange faces and moods, who loved to jump on his horse in jeans and cowboy boots and ride around as if in an American movie.

Amin Arsala, an avuncular former diplomat and adviser to Karzai who considered running for president, often warned Karzai about his brothers ruining his reputation. But either he cannot or will not stand up to them. There's a revolving door of diplomats, politicians and tribal leaders who all see Karzai, complain about his brothers and then leave, knowing he'll do nothing.

Qayum, an older brother, has spent most of his life in America running Afghan restaurants and, during the days of jihad, he introduced Karzai to U.S. government officials. He is a political guru for Karzai, though he complains Karzai doesn't listen to him. He resigned as a member of Parliament for Kandahar and spends much of his time in Saudi Arabia, trying to bring the Taliban in from the cold. Mahmoud is the hotblooded business mogul, vice chairman of the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce. He says he wants to promote free-market capitalism and complained to me one morning at his home in Kabul that his brother doesn't understand economics and can't run the government. "It's mujahedin," he told me, "it's personal relationships, cash basis, no institutions."

Many Afghans consider Mahmoud a bully who has muscled his way into the biggest business projects. He has 50 percent of Afghanistan's Toyota distributions by way of Jack Kemp, who introduced Mahmoud to Toyota executives. Karzai was unhappy about his family's involvement in such dealings, recalled Zalmay Khalilzad, who was the American ambassador at the time, adding, "He had the Japanese ambassador summoned to the palace to tell him, 'Don't give the dealership to my brother Mahmoud.' " But the Japanese listened to Kemp, not Karzai. Mahmoud is a major shareholder in Kabul Bank and, according to The New York Times, purchased the shares with a loan issued by the bank's founder. And he persuaded the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, a U.S. government agency, to offer him loans for a real estate development in Kandahar that everyone considers at once lovely and dodgy. Nice homes, grounds, guards, school. But it was government land purchased by the Karzais at $250 a jereb and sold at $28,000 a jereb.

Karzai's response? "My brother is an American businessman," he told me. "Business has got nothing to do with me. I don't know if he has shares in the Kabul Bank, but if he has, what can I do?" This habit of saying "What can I do?" is precisely what has undermined Karzai among many Afghans.

The brother who really gives the president heartburn is Ahmed Wali, his younger half-brother. A possibly apocryphal story that Afghans and diplomats love to repeat involves the president asking Ahmed Wali: "Are you engaged with the drug networks? Are you aiding x, y and z?" In the story, Ahmed Wali storms out of the meeting saying: "Well, Hamid, at least I'm only ruining Kandahar. You're ruining the whole country."

To me, Karzai claimed that after an article about his brother and drugs appeared in The New York Times: "I called the U.S. government and intelligence here to ask them, and they said: 'Totally wrong. We are sorry for that article.' " (A State Department spokesman would not comment on whether this conversation even took place.)

Then he added, "So I've done my job on that."

Yet on every trip I've made to Kandahar, I have heard another story about Ahmed Wali and drugs. Some of the people who have recounted the incidents are now dead. Like Malim Akbar Khakrezwal, an elder of the Alakozai tribe. In 2006, he took me around the fertile

lands of his district, which are now infiltrated by Taliban. He told me that when he was provincial-intelligence chief, he captured 1,400 kilograms of opium belonging to Jan Muhammad, then governor of Uruzgan and a very close friend of the president. Jan Muhammad told Akbar to release the opium, and he refused. “My brother called me and said, ‘We are not able to fight these big people,’ ” Akbar told me. “ ‘We are weak. Release them.’ So I went to Ahmed Wali and said: ‘You are my commander; what should I do with this opium? Should I give it back to Jan Muhammad?’ ‘Yes. Give it back,’ he said. Twenty days later I was released from my position.” Last year he was assassinated.

A Western intelligence official who has spent much of the last seven years in Kandahar and, for obvious reasons, wanted to remain anonymous, told me: “The Karzai family has opium and blood on their hands. They systematically install low-level officials up to provincial governors to make sure that, from the farm gate, in bulk, the opium is moved unfettered. When history analyzes this period and looks at this family, it will uncover a litany of extensive corruption that was tolerated because the West tolerated this family.”

Perhaps. Or not. As many Afghans have pointed out, U.S. history is full of robber barons and of families who made their fortunes during Prohibition, and in the words of Ashraf Ghani “turned very decent as families.”

“Karzai should see this as ‘Godfather II,’ ” a U.N. official says. “You got to get out of the business and go legit.”

This winter, as the stakes became higher and the new Obama administration appeared to snub Karzai, his theatrics began to take a more menacing turn. He was becoming less decisive and more distrustful of his advisers. He saw plots in every corner, interpreting the moves of Afghans, Americans and especially the British as proof that “they” were trying to unseat him. And in fact they were and maybe still are. The new U.S. ambassador, Karl Eikenberry, barely a month into his term, made a point of showing up at news conferences with other presidential candidates, including Ghani and Abdullah. Karzai threw a kind of presidential tantrum at his own press conference and accused the foreigners of intervening in Afghanistan’s national sovereignty (which, as financiers, administrators and protectors, they do every day). “That is of immense sensitivity to the people of Afghanistan and to myself, and that is something that we will fight tooth and nail,” Karzai said.

The American tactic seemingly worked. Afghans began talking overnight about how the Americans had adopted a new candidate — either Ghani or Abdullah. And while few Afghans knew much about either rival, thanks to Karzai’s anger at Eikenberry, the names of Ghani and Abdullah were mentioned over and over in the news.

Paranoid people usually do, of course, have enemies. Diplomats smile over meals with Karzai, bring him gifts from abroad and then send reports home saying he’s unsteady. One diplomat seasoned in the Middle East and Asia told me, “He’s the most conspiratorial leader I’ve ever met.” Perhaps. But you have to see his presidency from Karzai’s point of view.

If there was a clear turning point, a moment when the Karzai government began to lose its grip, it was in the spring of 2006. On a sunny morning at the end of that May, on the northern outskirts of Kabul, an American soldier in a convoy lost control of his truck and careered into rush-hour traffic. Five people were killed. Many more were wounded. Afghans began pelting the American vehicles with stones. The Americans fired in the air. By the time word spread

across Kabul, the story had ballooned into a massacre of civilians by drunken American soldiers. Waves of young Afghan men set buildings ablaze, attacking anyone and anything associated with foreigners and the government. They shouted, “Down with America,” and “Down with Karzai,” as they burned a billboard-size portrait of the president. Even medical students joined the mob. The police were nowhere to be seen; or if they were, it was as ordinary rioters who’d thrown off their uniforms.

The mob raged on for six hours. A dozen people were killed and a hundred wounded. The defense minister finally deployed troops onto the streets. Karzai ordered a curfew and went on TV to reassure the population.

Inside the Arg palace, no one was reassured, least of all Karzai. “He was shocked at how vulnerable we all were,” Jawed Ludin, then Karzai’s chief of staff, told me not long ago. “And he was angry with the Afghan police and international security forces.” This wasn’t the Taliban. This wasn’t Pakistan. It was a public revolt. And there were no government institutions that could stop it.

Karzai began to suspect a plot to unseat him. “He knew that Marshal Fahim was unhappy with him ever since he was removed as vice president and minister of defense,” one palace official recalls. Karzai was desperate to find out whether the riots were spontaneous or whether Fahim orchestrated them. For hours on end, he sat in a room behind his office watching footage collected from various sources. Much of it showed the mob arriving at Parliament. Why, Karzai wondered, did Yunous Qanooni, the speaker of the Parliament, send out a delegation to negotiate with the rioters as if they were a legitimate group and not a bunch of hooligans? Qanooni and Fahim (both Tajiks from the Northern Alliance) must have been up to something. But what?

“Every Pashtun was convinced it was a Tajik plot led by the Northern Alliance,” Ronald Neumann, the U.S. ambassador at the time, told me. Most Kabulis agreed. Some medical students, who happily participated in the mayhem, told me that Northern Alliance commanders were “among us.” A British adviser to the government told me: “I was with Rabbani’s son in his hotel while he claimed to be organizing the riots from his mobile phone and boasting about it. It was completely bizarre.” Whether or not it was organized, the students and young men happily joined in the fray to let off four years of pent-up frustration. They were fed up with the arrogance of American soldiers. They were fed up with hearing about the billions of aid dollars that came to Afghanistan and went into the pockets of American contractors and their Afghan partners. And they were terrified by the return of the Taliban, not just in the south but sneaking around various neighborhoods of Kabul.

Karzai couldn’t get a straight answer from anyone. And when he didn’t get to the bottom of it, he suspected his own intelligence apparatus. Amrullah Saleh, his head of intelligence, had been Fahim’s translator back in the anti-Soviet days of jihad. Saleh was America’s man, not Karzai’s choice. Frustrated and rash, Karzai questioned Saleh’s loyalty in front of other officials. Saleh submitted his resignation (which was not accepted). It wasn’t the first and certainly wouldn’t be the last time Saleh tried to resign.

And what about the Americans? The C.I.A.’s station chief in Kabul at the time was a friend of Karzai’s from their days together in the Uruzgan mountains fighting the Taliban. Karzai met with him and Ambassador Neumann. Karzai was livid and unnerved. If the riots were spontaneous, Karzai told them, he should resign. It means they don’t want you here and they

don’t want me, and I don’t want to remain the president. I want to leave.

The station chief was firm, according to a source who was present. No, Mr. President, you are not leaving.

“I felt really bad for him,” Jawed Ludin recalled. Karzai was so alone. He continued to watch the riot footage in his back room, trying to glean the plot. “I realized that, at that time, he had no dependable instrument of power,” Ludin said. “He didn’t have the money, the police, the intelligence. He had nothing.”

It was Karzai’s Nixon moment. People inside and outside the palace spoke of life “before the 8th of Jowza” (the date of the riots) and “after the 8th of Jowza.” That is, before May 29, 2006, and after.

Whom could he trust? All he could do was begin recasting the play, substituting Pashtun jihadi commanders for non-Pashtun ones. He began to surround himself with the former loyalists of his old friend Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. This was the same commander whom the Americans named, in 2003, as a “specially designated global terrorist.” This was the man who had recently declared himself an open ally of Al Qaeda. But while Karzai’s new cohort might still have had loyalties to Hekmatyar, they could at least be organized, disciplined and trusted to a certain extent.

The riots woke Karzai up to the fact that, in choosing not to have a political party, he had completely isolated himself. He had no constituency. He had thought he could be a symbol of unity for all Afghans, but even a Mandela or a Gandhi needed a party or a grass-roots movement. Karzai had little more than his own family and weekly video conferences with President George Bush. So the Pashtun jihadis gradually became his constituency and insurance policy.

The riots coincided with the resurgence of the Taliban, the American withdrawal from the south and the slow arrival of disjointed NATO forces. Every NATO country came with its own mandate and its own rules of engagement. And most of them thought they were deploying to a peacekeeping mission. Meanwhile, elements in the Pakistani military-intelligence agency were sending in suicide bombers and Taliban foot soldiers to take over Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Zabul. Such a chaotic scene needed a firm, decisive and confident hand.

In 2005 Sima Simar, the chairwoman of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, who knew Karzai from exile days in Pakistan, along with Louise Arbour, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, presented Karzai with a survey titled “A Call for Justice.” The findings were astounding. Seventy percent of Afghans said they had suffered direct losses, injuries and violations over two decades of war. They wanted war criminals brought to justice and barred from public office. Karzai told Arbour at the time: “Madam High Commissioner, I know justice is very important. Human beings are prisoners of their memories. If you don’t deal with them properly you cannot get rid of them.”

“He spoke like Mandela, Martin Luther King,” recalled Nader Nadery, a member of the commission that had been fighting to get Karzai to support dealing with the crimes of the past. Karzai appointed a special committee to create an action plan for transitional justice — including ministers and judicial advisers who would work alongside the U.N. By late 2006,

they had arrived at a compromise plan. There would be a vetting process, truth commissions and even the possibility of tribunals.

On Dec. 10, 2006, Karzai attended the international Human Rights Day event at the national television and radio hall in Kabul. Nadery showed a documentary in the middle of the event — a collection of harrowing tales by survivors of war crimes from the last two decades. The film silenced the hall. Karzai then got up and set aside his prepared speech.

He spoke about the courage of a girl in the film who jumped from the fifth floor to save her honor because warlords wanted to rape her. He spoke of the mass graves and massacres and announced that he was launching the long-awaited action plan for peace, reconciliation and justice. And from now on, this day would be reserved to give dignity to the victims.

Karzai then moved from the sufferings of the past to the present. Not only did he have no power to stop the warlords, he said, "we can't prevent the terrorists from coming from Pakistan. And we can't prevent the coalition from bombing the civilians. And our children are dying because of this." He told the story of a 2-year-old girl from Kandahar who'd just been brought to the palace. A NATO airstrike killed her entire family and left her paralyzed. The toll of the year, his helplessness, the dying children — it was all too much. The president's voice broke, his lips trembled and he began to cry. He took a handkerchief from under his glass to dry his eyes. "Cruelty at the highest level," he quivered. "The cruelty is too much."

The president, too, was suffering. Everyone in the hall was weeping.

A few days later, Human Rights Watch released a report documenting 22 years of war crimes by the communists, the mujahedin and the Taliban. The list included current and former government officials like Rabbani, Fahim, Dostum.

The warlords smelled a plot. Using their parliamentary power, they drafted legislation to give themselves amnesty for all past crimes. They bused their supporters in from all over the country. Ten thousand people gathered in Ghazi Stadium, the site of the Taliban's notorious public executions. They waved placards, "Long Live Dostum," "Death to America," "Death to Human Rights," "Death to Dogwashers." Most of the leaders of the civil-war factions showed up for the fun.

"After that, Karzai became afraid," Nadery said. Though he never rejected the amnesty law, he also never signed it. It was another turning point in Karzai's presidency. Rangin Spanta, who was part of the transitional-justice action committee and is now foreign minister, told me he tried to resign: "Karzai rejected my resignation. 'You must be quiet,' he said. 'Let us look forward, because the balance of power is not in our interest.' " Maybe. But there are more Afghans who were victims of the warlords than who supported them. And most of those warlords — Sayyaf, Dostum, Fahim, Khalili, Mohaqiq — went on to join Karzai's presidential re-election campaign.

When I asked Karzai about the return of warlords to power, he said: "It's a great thing to talk about the kind of justice that is ideal and that we all should have. But do we have the means? Do we have the luxury of that?"

By late 2007, Karzai's turn toward accommodation with warlords, tribalism and semiretired

jihadis — and away from the international community — seems to have been completed. The palace had become like a Shakespearean stage, its officials, like so many Iagos, filling Karzai's mind with plots and treachery. The British and the Americans, worried that Afghanistan was sinking beyond repair, conceived the position of a civilian czar who could coordinate the U.N. mission and the NATO mission and possibly bring some order into the chaos of the Arg palace. The man they chose was the British diplomat Paddy Ashdown, who had been the international community's high representative to Bosnia until 2006. Karzai was at first intrigued by the idea and even accepted it. But the Iagos in the palace feared they would lose their gatekeeping status and the money they earned from it. They persuaded Karzai that the choice of Ashdown, who was born in British India to a colonial family and who had served as a British spy, was evidence of a British conspiracy.

Karzai has a complicated relationship with the British. He favors English shoes. He was a fan of "Last of the Summer Wine," a three-decades-long BBC sitcom about the madcap adventures of elderly friends in the Yorkshire countryside. He has a romantic fascination with British royalty and rearranged his schedule to attend the Prince of Wales's 60th birthday. Most of the other attendees were real royalty. "He thinks the Prince of Wales is a sensitive man, who understands him and Islam and the region," one diplomat explained. On another occasion he visited the prince's house in Scotland, seizing the chance to break out of his palace prison and stride across the moors for hours. Perhaps it reminded him of his days at college in Simla, where he used to walk for miles across the Indian hills.

"Maybe he just pretends to be a great lover of English culture," the diplomat told me. "He thinks they're in league with the Pakistanis and that they are two-faced and tricky and if they wanted to they could defeat the Taliban but they don't because they want to keep their troops there."

Karzai believes that evidence for a British conspiracy can be found in the story of Musa Qala, a collection of villages in the deserts of Helmand and a crossroads in the drug-transport routes. The tale has become a "Rashomon"-like parable. For Karzai it is a story of British duplicity. For the British it is a story of Karzai's treachery and American bullying. And for the Americans it's a story of European appeasement and Karzai's madness.

In October 2006, after months of fighting between the British and Taliban that had left everyone exhausted and bloodied, all sides agreed on a truce. The British and the Taliban pulled back. The elders promised to keep the Taliban out. But almost immediately there were problems. The Taliban began creeping in. The town fell again. The Americans accused the British of wimping out of a fight. They pressured Karzai to distance himself from the whole scenario.

Gen. David Richards, the British officer in charge of NATO forces in Afghanistan, was caught in the middle of it all. Karzai liked and trusted Richards and appreciated his style. "He'd sometimes get me over three or four times a day to talk about all sorts of things, not just military," Richards recalled. Karzai gave Richards and Helmand's governor, Muhammad Daud, who helped organize the truce, his blessing. "The U.S. military and, I suspect, the C.I.A. were pretty hostile to it from the outset," Richards told me. Gen. Dan McNeill of the U.S. Army made no secret of his feelings. Later, when he replaced Richards, he vowed that there'd be no "Musa Qalas" on his watch. And to drive the point home, McNeill began bombing targets around the district as soon as he took over from Richards.

Karzai was, of course, caught in the middle between the British and the Americans. The Americans had more money, more troops, more power. To make matters worse, on the heels of Musa Qala, General Richards flew to Islamabad to see Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf. "I delivered Musharraf a pretty sharp message that we expected him to do more to help, but I think Karzai believed that I was getting too close to Musharraf," Richards told me. Richards began passing notes between the two hostile presidents, trying to get them to work with each other.

The palace advisers seized on those visits as proof that the British were going to sell out Afghanistan. They told Karzai that Richards and Musharraf didn't talk about Afghanistan at all. They talked about London and terrorism. Look at Helmand, they'd say. It used to be so peaceful. Until the British forced you to remove Sher Muhammad Akhundzada. Whom did they replace him with? Muhammad Daud, plucked from the National Security Council. Who constructed the National Security Council? The British. Who paid for it? The British. Who has advisers there? The British.

The advisers pushed Karzai closer to the edge. Look around you, closer to home, they said. Is that not a coup in the works? Jawed Ludin, the chief of staff, and Hanif Atmar, minister of education, had both studied in Britain. They have nightly dinners and meetings with the minister of defense, the minister of foreign affairs. . . .

One day in front of several people inside the palace, Karzai turned accusingly on Ludin and Atmar: There's news the British are conspiring against us, against me personally. There's news that you are meeting very frequently. What is happening? Why are you meeting?

They replied that they were just getting together socially.

Karzai said he didn't believe them, according to an Afghan official present at the incident.

The next day Karzai regretted his words, as he often does. He apologized. It was too late. Both men submitted their resignations. Ludin became ambassador to Norway. Atmar stayed on as minister for education, but he and the president hardly spoke for months until Karzai appointed him as the new minister of the interior. These rifts have since healed and Karzai's men have rallied for the presidential campaign.

"Every conceivable lie is told to the president to alienate him from his friends," Ashraf Ghani told me. "He accused me in front of Secretary Rice and the British secretary of joining Ashdown in a conspiracy to unseat him. I had a family illness in Dubai around the clock. I met with Paddy Ashdown once in my life. Yet the Afghan government for a week was concentrating on an alleged conspiracy."

By the end of 2007, Karzai's worst fears seemed to come to fruition. The new governor of Helmand, an old friend of Karzai's father, claimed to have uncovered a plot by the British for a Taliban training camp. The allegations were so far-fetched that the entire diplomatic community began to think Karzai had gone mad. In reality, Michael Semple, then the European Union's political adviser, had come up with a plan for a Taliban re-education camp in Helmand, and several of Karzai's advisers had agreed to it. Yet, in front of his security team, Karzai accused the British of total treachery.

According to one diplomat, the British responded that they had been trying to pursue

reconciliation and had documents approving the project signed by Afghanistan's ministry of the interior and by its intelligence service. Karzai's advisers squirmed and said nothing. Apparently no one had dared to tell Karzai about the camp.

The damage was done. Enraged, Karzai had Michael Semple and Mervyn Patterson, two of the foreigners most knowledgeable about Afghanistan, thrown out of the country and an Afghan general imprisoned.

I asked Karzai if he really believes, as so many Afghans do, that the British and Americans don't want the Taliban defeated. "I don't know," he said. "But I wonder. After all, I am also an Afghan. So I have to believe in what the majority of the Afghan people believe in." And that the British want the Taliban to take over Helmand and Kandahar? "The Taliban are already in Helmand," he said with a knowing look.

"In my experience of working in 21 countries, one thing I've learned," the American election guru James Carville told me over the phone in his Southern drawl, "unpopular incumbents do not do well in anything approaching a fair election." Carville has taken on the job of consulting for Ashraf Ghani's campaign. It's not for the money, he told me. It's more for sentimental reasons. "I really want to help," he said. "This is an instance where you know in your heart the difference in Afghanistan in five years under Ashraf or under Karzai will be really profound for the average person's life."

The consensus in Afghanistan is that if the Aug. 20 elections are somehow fair — which is impossible to guarantee — there will most likely be a runoff in a second round. That is what the opposition is counting on. Despite the belief across the country that the Americans or someone else will decide who becomes president, I found people in remote corners campaigning for Abdullah, Ghani, Karzai and others.

Karzai remains well ahead. What happens if he wins? "What will you do then?" I asked an American working for the Obama administration.

"The first step is to shift away from the weekly pat on the back he got from Bush but not be as removed as Obama was," he said. "Then if we can reduce his paranoia and if he has a renewed mandate and if we get the good Karzai, the charming Karzai. . . . " It was a lot of ifs.

As for Karzai, he has patched up his relations with his ministers, his staff, his enemies and various opponents, promising more positions than he can possibly fill. What is most disturbing to Afghans, however, is the criminal personalities he has brought into his campaign. They dominate both politics and the economy: the glitzy new Kabul neighborhood of Sherpur, with its "narcotecture" palaces, has become their home and the symbol of their power. In Sherpur's shadow, as I sloshed through the streets of the other Kabul, past refugees in muddy tents and a woman left like detritus on the road, quivering, I wondered how Afghanistan's warlords, steeped in the jihadi tradition of intimidation, could ever bring peace, or economic hope, to the Afghan people. "With enough resources," the American official said, "a lot of these guys can clean up their act."

That is not the belief of Dr. Azam Dadfar, the minister of higher education and one of the few psychiatrists in the country trained in psychoanalysis. In the 1980s he ran a trauma clinic in the Peshawar refugee camps. Today, he said, out of these decades of war, a new Afghan character type has emerged — a borderline personality characteristic of jihadis. "Multiple-

personality disorder is a coping mechanism," he said, speaking about the whole generation of men who grew up in jihad. "A young man who lost his father, his home, he looks to become the cleverest, the most criminal, the lion. In the jungle, there are no values but self-preservation. There's no law. And this character learns to lie even to himself."

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