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US fed up with troops dying to prop up Karzai

PAUL MCGEOUGH IN KABUL

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IT SEEMS that Hamid Karzai just can't be trusted on his own.

When he breast the microphone at the presidential palace on October 20, to make an oblique admission that he attempted to steal the election and would go along with the second poll which he had resisted for weeks, he was flanked by a high-powered international posse - lest he depart from the agreed script.

On one side was the US senator John Kerry; on the other, the United Nations special envoy Kai Eide; and riding shotgun were the British and French ambassadors.



From the looting class...Hamid Karzai flanked by his vice-presidents Mohammad Qasim Fahim (left) and Karim Khalil
Photo: AP

Fast forward two weeks. Last Sunday, Karzai's challenger, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, played exquisite politics. Baling out of the second vote which was to be held today, he left a wounded Karzai to claim the presidency, knowing that the stench of a million stolen votes would cling to him for the next five years.

On Tuesday, Karzai was back on the presidential dais, this time to claim his prize. But lest he make any reckless promises - say, to eject some of the more odorous among his cronies from office - the enforcers came from among the cronies, his vice presidents Karim Khalil and Mohammad Qasim Fahim, both former warlords from the ranks of Afghanistan's looting class.

Arguably, the first of these appearances by Karzai was humiliating; the second intimidating. As elections go, few have been as absurd. The President set out to steal the election and got away with it in broad daylight. The UN knew what he was up to and did nothing about it. Led by Washington, the diplomatic corps in Kabul insisted that for the sake of the legitimacy of the office, there had to be a second poll - only to say it was never really needed once Abdullah pulled the rug from under Karzai.

After Karzai's vote was discounted for fraud, he gained 2.3 million of the 4.8 million votes cast on August 20. But both his share and the total vote paled beside the "vote" won by the Taliban - more than 10 million registered voters stayed away.

In the aftermath, Peter Galbraith - a senior UN official in Kabul who was sacked after pushing for the UN to reveal the extent of the preparation for fraud before the first vote, wrote that before the election, Karzai was seen as ineffectual and corrupt. Now he was ineffectual, corrupt and illegitimate.

In the process, something else in Karzai the man was revealed. Last March the US President, Barack Obama, sent an extra 21,000 American troops to Afghanistan to help secure this election - and while some of them were dying or suffering hideous wounds in battle, Karzai's campaign was happily rorting the process that the young Americans and troops from around the world were attempting to protect.

The unreality of Karzai's return to office was underscored midweek, when a senior Obama aide told *The New York Times*: "We're going to know in the next three to six months whether he's doing anything differently - whether he can seriously address corruption, whether he can raise an army that ultimately can take over from us."

That's not a lot of time for redemption. At his tent-office off the shoulder of a crowded highway near the Kabul parliamentary complex, the man who got the third highest vote on August 20, the maverick Ramazan Bashardost, likened it to a bad movie, telling the *Herald* that Charlie Chaplin was playing Karzai and Mr Bean was Abdullah.

As the election drama climaxed, Obama was in the eighth week of a huddle at the White House, trying to work out Afghanistan before making a decision on a call by General Stanley McChrystal, his top general in Afghanistan, for an extra 40,000 troops.

Tactical leaks on these internal deliberations suggest a radical repositioning of US policy, the result of which will be that McChrystal will not get all that he is asking for.

The objective is being wound back - from the Jeffersonian democracy sought by the former president George Bush to the creation of a state that is capable of protecting itself.

There is a realisation that the Taliban, like drugs, are a feature of the Afghan landscape and that instead of eliminating it, the best Washington can hope for is to create circumstances in which the insurgents cannot take control of the country.

So the thinking is turning to the protection of less than a dozen key population centres. Inverting the Vietnam War theory that every village was strategically important, it relies on the Iraq experience of holding the big centres.

The sparsely populated but volatile southern province of Helmand is an example. There, 20 per cent of the foreign forces are waging a relentless war to protect 3 per cent of the population whose day-to-day existence would not be greatly altered if the Taliban were among them - but with no foreign forces to shoot at.

The public critique of Obama's private critique of the McChrystal plan for the war is intense. Last week Kerry asked, if al-Qaeda's cross-border shift into nuclear-armed Pakistan and the Islamist crisis confronting Islamabad create a much bigger threat to US interests, why was it that Washington was devoting 30 times the time and resources that Pakistan got to Afghanistan?

Stuck with Karzai, Obama is figuring how to work around him. He has called for a study of the individual Afghan provinces and the men who govern them - could they, along with tribal elders and even the local militias, be trusted to be more effective allies in managing development funds? Could elements of the Taliban be trusted to help run things in areas from which the Americans might pull back?

"How much of the country can we just leave to be run by the locals?" a senior US official asked a *Washington Post* reporter. "How do you separate those who have taken up arms because they oppose the presence of foreigners in their area because they are getting paid to fight us ... from those who want to restore a Taliban government?"

The answer to his question seemed to be - remove the foreign forces.

It all points to a White House acceptance of the oft-stated advice that in Afghanistan, the presence of foreign forces is as much a core issue as is what the Taliban might or might not do. Unlike Iraq, where US forces were caught between warring factions, most of the violence in Afghanistan is targeted at the foreign forces.

Observing that most of the areas of Afghanistan that were stable were under local control, the official asked two more questions - "Can you get benign local control in more places? Will

that be easier to achieve, [will it be] more effective than trying to establish more central government control?"

Think-tanks around the world are in Afghan overdrive.

In a report published by the Centre for a New American Security, a former US army officer, Andrew Exum, rated three likely scenarios.

Rating it as "frightening as it is unlikely," his worst case sees Afghanistan returning to its pre-September 11 nadir - Taliban back in control, hosting training camps for terrorist groups.

"Most likely," he says is that most countries in the US-led coalition will peel away, leaving American and Afghan security forces to wage a more narrowly focused long-term struggle.

His third option is the emergence of a "functioning Afghan state" which is "inhospitable to transnational terror groups". This he says is possible, but would "require a further commitment of precious US time and resources".

Meanwhile, the White House deliberations drag on. If more troops are to be sent, it will be well into next year before they arrive in Afghanistan - and in that time, many beyond Afghanistan will wonder at the jaundice revealed by ordinary Afghans.

"Democracy?" asked a Kabul cabbie during a local television phone-in. "That's an American euphemism for occupation. We don't have patriotic leaders either - so, the people's hands are tied behind their backs."