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It's payback time in Kabul

By Gareth Porter

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WASHINGTON - The Barack Obama administration is talking tough to Afghan President Hamid Karzai about the need for decisive action on corruption and governance reform, but its main objective is to prevent particularly corrupt and incompetent warlords from getting plum ministries as rewards for helping clinch his re-election, Inter Press Service (IPS) has learned.

Obama told reporters last week that he had emphasized to Karzai in a phone call to congratulate him on his re-election that there would have to be "a much more serious effort to eradicate corruption" and that "the proof is not going to be in words, it's going to be in deeds".

The New York Times reported the day after the Obama-Karzai conversation that the Obama administration wanted Karzai to prosecute certain high-profile figures known to be involved in corruption. The story referred to the president's brother, Kandahar warlord Ahmed Wali Karzai, former defense minister Mohammed Fahim and General Abdul Rashid Dostum.

And last Wednesday, Admiral Mike Mullen, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that Karzai must "take concrete steps to eliminate corruption", adding it means "you have to rid yourself of those who are corrupt, you have to actually arrest and prosecute them".

The new public rhetoric and press stories have given the impression that the Obama administration is now pursuing far-reaching reform of Afghanistan's system of governance. But the sudden intensification of administration pressure on the issue of corruption is aimed less at far-reaching reform of the system than at avoiding a significant worsening of the problem in the wake of Karzai's re-election, which was dogged with allegations of fraud.

In return for their pledges to guarantee huge majorities for Karzai in the August 20 election, the Afghan president had to make promises to a number of power brokers or warlords in the provinces. Some of those were promised key ministries in the next government, according to Gilles Dorronsoro, a specialist on Afghanistan at the Carnegie Endowment for International

Peace.

The main concern in Kabul and Washington in the wake of Karzai's re-election is how many of the warlords to whom Karzai is indebted will be rewarded with ministries when the new cabinet is announced.

"Everybody who supported Karzai now expects their payback," said Dorronsoro, who spent the entire month of August in Afghanistan.

It is understood that the Obama administration's pressure on Karzai over the corruption issue is aimed in large part at heading off the nomination of some of the most incompetent and corrupt warlords to key ministries, and that Karzai is aware of this US concern.

It now seems very likely, however, that some lucrative ministries will be given to warlord allies of Karzai.

Dorronsoro believes the administration's influence on Karzai's new government is going to be constrained by Karzai's dependence on provincial and sub-provincial warlords who control the actual levers of power outside Kabul. The US pressure on Karzai "can only work on a few ministries and a few issues", he told IPS.

It is understood here that administration officials are well aware of the political constraints on Karzai imposed by the power of warlords in the provinces. They understand that reforming the governance system of Afghanistan cannot be achieved simply by leaning on Karzai.

"There is no Afghan government in the way there is an American government," counter-insurgency guru David Kilcullen observed on a panel at the US Institute of Peace last August. "There are only a series of fiefdoms."

Kilcullen cited those warlord fiefdoms, and the lack of law and order that accompanies them, as the main driver of popular support for the Taliban insurgency.

The power of the warlords, which US policy abetted by providing them with cash, arms and legitimacy in the wake of the overthrow of the Taliban regime, poses serious obstacles to any US initiative aimed at reducing corruption.

Although US commander General Stanley McChrystal warned that US ties with regional power brokers have alienated much of the Afghan population from foreign troops, US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military contingents remain heavily dependent on them for the provision of perimeter security for their fixed bases and to protect supply convoys, as IPS has reported.

Even the idea of prosecuting the president's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai over his role in the drug trade is likely to generate disagreement within the administration, because the Central Intelligence Agency's operations directorate continues to use his paramilitary organization for intelligence and counterinsurgency operations.

There is no evidence that the administration is moving toward a more aggressive posture toward the warlords in general. Instead, the problem is viewed as one in which US interests in

supporting the central government must be balanced with its interests in cooperation with provincial and sub-provincial power holders, IPS has learned.

National security officials tend to believe, for example, that the way to handle the problem of abuses by the militia personnel and police affiliated with individual warlords is not to take on the warlords but to do more to train national police.

Despite the flurry of activity on the corruption issue, the administration still hasn't decided what approach it should adopt to promote governance and anti-corruption reforms. Several different options are said to be still under discussion.

One of the approaches being proposed by some officials is to get Karzai to agree to a detailed plan of action which would involve both the United States and other states heavily involved in Afghanistan, as reported by McClatchy last Monday.

The report referred to the plan as the "Afghanistan Compact" and said the administration had been working with the Karzai government and other allied governments "for months", according to McClatchy.

But an intelligence official told McClatchy he was doubtful about such a compact, because it would require Karzai to renege on promises he had made to his warlord allies.

A previous "Compact on Afghanistan", which was agreed to by the Karzai government and 50 other states at a conference in London on February 1, 2006, has been an embarrassing failure.

That document included benchmarks for progress in bringing about the rule of law, human rights, public administration reform and "anti-corruption", among other areas, by the end of 2010. In those politically sensitive areas, however, the Karzai regime not only did not deliver on the 2006 pledges but has even retrogressed on many of the targets.

Some officials are suggesting that the administration avoid using the term "compact" altogether, because of the well-known fate of the previous effort.

One of the problems associated with trying to get Karzai to do anything about governance and corruption, IPS has learned, is that it has taken months in the past to work out any agreement with Karzai on any politically sensitive issue. There is now a sense in the administration, however, that it may not have that much time to have an impact on Karzai's behavior.