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Afghan graft battle stands or falls with warlords

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President Hamid Karzai may profess a desire to eradicate corruption and sack corrupt officials, but promises to tackle the rot in Afghanistan's government stand or fall with his warlord friends. In a nation of weak institutions, patronage and governance revolve around powerful warlords and strongmen -- the kingmakers who propelled Karzai back to the presidential palace and whom he cannot afford to alienate. Western allies, pondering whether to deploy thousands more troops against a virulent Taliban insurgency and how to reconcile domestic opposition to the war, demand concrete action to sack and even arrest corrupt officials. Yet these officials are the same men who can cause serious problems for Karzai's second mandate, already discredited by a fraudulent August election, if not amply rewarded for putting him in power. "The likelihood that Karzai will tackle corruption is limited, the whole systems rests on corruption," said Mariam Abou Zahab, researcher at the Centre for International Studies and Research in Paris. At his first public appearance after election officials, whom he appointed, declared him president for a second time, Karzai promised to eradicate the "stain of corruption." As US President Barack Obama and Western leaders piled on pressure, Karzai agreed in a subsequent US media interview to sack dishonest officials.