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Afghanistan 'Cannot Advance on Words Alone'

After a controversial election, Afghan President Hamid Karzai was finally sworn in for his second term this week. The high-ranking Western diplomats who attended the inauguration said it was a decisive moment for the strife-torn land. But German commentators are not impressed with Karzai's promises.

Cathrin Schaer

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As Afghan President Hamid Karzai **begins his second term in office** over-shadowed by major election irregularities, observers in the West are asking what the future holds for the strife-ridden country.

Karzai's inauguration on Thursday was attended by several high-ranking Western diplomats, including Germany's newly appointed foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, as well as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and British Foreign Secretary David Miliband.

Before and after the high-security event in Kabul, various Western visitors -- including Clinton and Westerwelle -- gave speeches in which they impressed upon the re-elected Afghan president the need to get a handle on his country, including tackling **corruption**, the drug trade and the Taliban, as well as addressing the ongoing security of his people. There was also talk of the eventual withdrawal of NATO troops.

In return, Karzai **gave a speech** in which he set goals that promised to do everything the Western guests had suggested, saying that Afghan military and police would be able to take full responsibility for the country's security within five years. He also said he would organize a tribal council that he would moderate, in order to bring various regions of Afghanistan under control.

Commentators writing in Germany's main newspapers Friday were not convinced, pointing out what they saw as the hypocrisy behind the speech-making. They noted that, for all the pressure that Western powers are putting on the Afghan administration, there is not much chance that any of the visiting diplomats' veiled threats about troop withdrawal will become reality.

Commentators also point out the double standards in Karzai's own speech. It is all very well for him to talk about his aims in government, they say, but is he willing -- or able -- to translate those into action?

The left-leaning **Die Tageszeitung** writes:

"High-ranking foreign ministers gathered in some sort of strange parallel world in the middle of the Afghan war zone to honor a man who appears to be a vote-fixer. But no, say Karzai's guests, we are not actually caving in. And, they say, they will take no more -- absolutely no more -- of this nonsense. Enough with the corruption, enough with these criminal warlords. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the minister for **conflicts that look a little bit like war**, set the tone. Foreign Minister Westerwelle and his colleagues followed it. If Karzai doesn't start behaving himself, he'd better watch out, they say."

"Watch out for what exactly? A democratic election? The end of foreign aid for his regime? Are NATO troops going to pull out? Of course not. The nations that have invested militarily in Afghanistan are as dependent on Karzai as he is upon them."

"Threats are only real when those doing the threatening have some intention of carrying them out. Should NATO really oppose Karzai, should they let the current regime collapse, they would do themselves as much harm -- possibly more -- than they would do Karzai. There could be no exit strategy if that happened. The new, supposedly harder, line for Karzai only indicates one thing -- the impotence of NATO troops in Afghanistan."

The center-left **Süddeutsche Zeitung** writes:

"Hamid Karzai is a clever man. He knows there is no alternative to having him as the Afghan president. He also knows exactly what his guests want to hear and he delivered that in his speech. His regime will fight against corruption and drug trafficking and in five years

Afghanistan's own security forces will be able to guarantee peace to the Afghan people. But Karzai's speech-making means nothing. His nation cannot advance on words alone. This president has already led Afghanistan for eight years and he himself is responsible for the sad state of affairs."

"That is one side of the story. The other is that the West has also made mistakes by supporting Karzai as the sole power. Power in Afghanistan does not lie with the presidency alone, it also lies in the tribal territories. Reaching an understanding with the Taliban is only possible if more thought is put into the tribal areas and if the president reduces his claims to power. Which is why Karzai's plan to start a tribal council that he can moderate is the right one."

The conservative daily **Die Welt** writes:

"Before Hamid Karzai was sworn into office, US President Barack Obama said of his Afghan counterpart that he had both strengths and weaknesses. In the meantime NATO politicians have been showing how disillusioned they are with Karzai. Once he was their man in Kabul - - now he has become yet another problem."

"Which is why, at least in his speech, Karzai tried to meet the West's expectations. Now the international community must be more ingenious in coming up with different kinds of leverage that could keep Karzai's administration to its promises of more efficiency and less corruption. Instead of waiting for Kabul, perhaps the German military should consider paying for the urgently required extra police in north Afghanistan themselves. By doing this, the Germans would get some necessary local connections and have more influence on the security forces there."

"The most important thing, though, is that the Western forces finally find their way out of the disoriented phase they are currently in. A mission without a direction or a goal is destined to fail."

The business daily **Handelsblatt** writes:

"Hamid Karzai tolerates corruption, comes to dubious arrangements with warlords and does too little against drug trafficking and the Taliban. Which is why the West is annoyed; they see in him and his administration a hopeless case. And they are wondering how they can still rescue Afghanistan."

"Their answer is a strategy that is a combination of carrot and stick. The carrot involves warm words and more money. The stick involves thinly veiled threats about troop withdrawals as well as open attempts to work around Karzai and directly influence provincial leaders. This

sounds all too familiar. Such methods have been used in the past, most recently in Iraq. But it didn't really work there either. It cannot -- Afghanistan and Iraq are nothing like Germany and Japan after World War II."

"The Western powers that started this conflict eight years ago do not seem to have understood this. During her last visit to Kabul, Hillary Clinton expressed the wish that Karzai would start a new contract with the Afghan people and said she hoped things would go better for them. The US secretary of state spoke as though she was talking about a European nation, as though Afghanistan was a country with a strong central administration and a homogenous people that heeded it. And as much as some would like it to be -- including Guido Westerwelle, who very much wants to take Karzai at his word -- it is not."