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Leading Afghan Activist Ousted From Rights Panel

By Matthew Rosenberg

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There have been few causes that Ahmad Nader Nadery, the prominent Afghan human rights activist, shied away from over the past decade: he spoke out on the killings of civilians by NATO and Taliban forces, on election fraud by President Hamid Karzai's supporters, even on land-grabbing by rich and well-connected Afghans whose mansions now dominate central Kabul's broken streets.

Mr. Nadery, 36, has long been an irritant to Afghanistan's elite. But the final straw for the Karzai administration appeared to be a report that he has championed, which exhaustively details atrocities committed here over three decades of war, the officials and activists said. The officials asked not to be identified because they are lobbying the Karzai administration to be more open about its decision — and to reconsider it. The activists also said they were worried that speaking out publicly could jeopardize their safety.

Mr. Nadery's ouster from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, which is appointed by the government but acts independently, raised fresh questions about the Karzai administration's commitment to human rights, which have been a major focus of the international effort here for the past decade. In that time, a small but vocal community of activists has grown up, and Mr. Nadery was at their forefront.

Lately, though, the activists have found themselves under increasing pressure from two flanks. On one side is a government dominated by former warlords whom Mr. Karzai cannot afford to

alienate; on the other, the Taliban and their allies, with their own checkered history on human rights. As the United States starts to cut back its forces and financing and pushes the government to negotiate with the Taliban, hard-won rights for women and minorities face an uncertain future.

The people named as offenders in the report — which Mr. Nadery described on Thursday as his “most important work” — include Taliban commanders and powerful politicians. Many were leaders of the mujahedeen resistance to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, who then played major roles in the civil war of the mid-1990s, the officials and activists said; some are now senior figures in the government.

Mr. Karzai’s spokesman did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Mr. Nadery, whose five-year term ran out on Dec. 16, said he was not formally told that his tenure would not be renewed. The terms of two other members of the nine-member commission also may not have been renewed, the officials said.

“This sends a very disturbing message to the people of Afghanistan that if you speak out about human rights, if you demand justice, you will be silenced,” said Dallas Mazoori, a former colleague of Mr. Nadery who remains involved in human rights issues in Afghanistan. She called him “the face of human rights in Afghanistan.”

Western officials said they were dismayed that the Karzai administration had made the decision this week at a private meeting of President Karzai and some senior officials and aides whom Mr. Nadery has criticized.

Mr. Nadery’s replacement is an associate of First Vice President Marshal Muhammad Qasim Fahim, activists and officials said; one Western official called the choice “exactly the wrong sign.”

Mr. Nadery declined on Thursday to discuss the details of the atrocities report, which has been in the works for about three years. It was not clear when it would be released. In an earlier interview, he had said the report documented “more than 180 mass graves, some with large numbers.” As for who was responsible, he said: “Unfortunately, it belongs to all sides in different stages of the conflict. The majority of people killed, a lot of them were P.O.W.’s or civilians.”

Mr. Nadery, who grew up in Kabul, was briefly imprisoned by the Taliban in the late 1990s, along with other Kabul University students, for writing reports advocating peace and dropping them anonymously at the United Nations office in the city. “We didn’t know where to send them,” he said.

After the fall of the Taliban, he became a prominent rights activist and was named to the commission in 2004; his five-year term formally began in December 2006.

Mr. Nadery also runs the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan and said he expected to stay on there. But he will lose his government security detail when the decree announcing his departure is released, a step expected on Saturday.

“I’ve received death threats,” Mr. Nadery said in an interview. “I am worried about my life, and my wife, and our small daughter, and my parents who live with me.” Still, he said, he did not plan to leave the country.