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Karzai Walking on Thin Ice

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Karzai unpopular with policymakers: Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO Secretary General, wrote in Washington Post on January 17 that Afghanistan's current problems were because of "too little good governance (and not) too much Taliban." Nearly eight years in coalition with Karzai, NATO's Secretary General's observation is no less than Karzai's searing public and political indictment. He added that Afghans needed a government that deserved their loyalty and trust. Karzai, his lieutenants have failed to command both the loyalty and trust of their people. Some still refer to him as "Mayor of Kabul."

Seven years almost wasted: Seven years into a relentless military campaign, both the US forces and the NATO commanders do not see much credibility that Karzai and his government could have commanded. Both Scheffer and US President Obama's special envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Ambassador Richard Holbrook have joined their whistle blowing on Karzai. The West is now waking up to the reality of continued poor and corrupt governance that has taken the frustration and violence of the Afghan people to a new level. This political disenchantment pushed more Afghans into militancy and that called for the American troops surge. Many observers of the region believe that this would not help much because the more military will not resolve the problems of governance and political fragmentation. Troops surge would rather increase the sentiment against both the Karzai government and the foreign troops.

Voices for alternates: Building further on his vision about the region, Ambassador Holbrook emphasized upon the need that the Americans be told the truth that the war "will last a long time (and) success will require new policies with regards to...tribal areas in Pakistan, drug lord of Afghanistan and the incompetence of the Afghan government."¹ Karzai has remained Washington's best bet in Afghanistan since the fall of Taliban in early 2002 but he has not taken Afghanistan anywhere. Another important voice in Washington, Fareed Zakaria, expressed his disappointment with Karzai's performance that has brought the Taliban back to fill in the vacuum. He noted that Taliban were equally or more unpopular in various areas of Afghanistan but they promised justice and a very rough justice rather than the chaos of the Karzai reign. Zakaria also noted that the upcoming presidential and local elections in Afghanistan must be free and fair and "should take place without disruption (with) viable alternative candidates" free to campaign.²

Why displeasure now? There could be two reasons to the recent displeasure and fatigue with Karzai government.

1. His supporters in the West now believe that he has been incompetent to deliver.
2. Displeasure could be a pressure tactic to pressing him to do more.

In both situations, Karzai and his government would not be able to swing into a quick action and claim some success on the most important front in the world in war on terror.

Alternatives to Karzai: The most potent contender against Karzai is the United Front, former Northern Alliance with strong components of Shoorai Nezar, led by Gen. Dostum, Prof. Rabbani's Jamiate Islami and Karim Khalili's Hizbe Wahdat. Many Afghan observers believe that the United Front will support a joint candidate and to ensure the larger Pashtoon support for success, Mustafa Zahir, grandson of former King Zahir Shah, is at the moment a likely choice. He is thought little known in Afghanistan and a lot of hard work would be expected of him. Among other alternatives, Ashraf Ghani and Ali Ahmed Jalali are other potential candidates and also have a good working relationship with both the American and the NATO in Afghanistan. Another dark horse could be Gul Agha Sherazi, governor Nangarhar who is believed to be a go-getter and a risk-taker. His performance in his province has win him many favors but unlike Ashraf and Ali Ahmed, he does not have much of a working history and relationship with the foreign presence.

Karzai's best chance: According to CBS News, many Pentagon officials have recommended a policy shift in the region by targeting Taliban and Al-Qaeda safe havens in Pakistan's tribal areas whom they see the main cause of Afghan instability. Any such change will require continuity in Kabul as Karzai has a shared history with Washington. Interesting is the fact that many senior defense officials in Obama's administration, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, propose on the contrary because a continuous support for Karzai directly means the continuation of the long and bloody battle in Afghanistan, a country and nation having history of unflinching resistance against foreign occupation. Ambassador Holbrook faces a gigantic challenge of putting things right in both the policy formulation and implementation. Much of the new policy's success would depend on the cooperation between the defense and the intelligence communities of America. The conflicting visions in Washington at this moment are among the strong saviors of Karzai but would it continue? It seemingly looks harder by the day.

¹ Washington Post. Jan. 17.

² Newsweek. Jan. 31.