

## **Afghan leader is seen to flout influence of U.S.**

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This month, with President Hamid Karzai looking ahead to a visit to the White House, he received a terse note from aides to President Obama: Your invitation has been revoked.

The reason, according to American officials, was Mr. Karzai's announcement that he was emasculating an independent panel that had discovered widespread fraud in Mr. Karzai's re-election last year.

Incensed, Mr. Karzai extended an invitation of his own — to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, who flew to Kabul and delivered a fiery anti-American speech inside Afghanistan's presidential palace.

"Karzai was enraged," said an Afghan with knowledge of the events, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the delicacy of the issue. "He invited Ahmadinejad to spite the Americans."

The dispute was smoothed over only this week, when Mr. Obama flew to Kabul for a surprise dinner with Mr. Karzai. White House officials emphasized that the most important purpose of Mr. Obama's trip to Afghanistan was to visit American troops there.

But the red carpet treatment of Mr. Ahmadinejad is just one example of how Mr. Karzai is putting distance between himself and his American sponsors, prominent Afghans and American officials here said. Even as Mr. Obama pours tens of thousands of additional American troops into the country to help defend Mr. Karzai's government, Mr. Karzai now often voices the view that his interests and the United States' no longer coincide.

Neither Mr. Karzai nor his spokesman, Waheed Omar, could be reached Monday. But according to Afghan associates, Mr. Karzai recently told lunch guests at the presidential palace that he believes the Americans are in Afghanistan because they want to dominate his country and the region, and that they pose an obstacle to striking a peace deal with the Taliban. During the recent American-dominated military offensive in the town of Marja — the largest of the war — Mr. Karzai stood mostly in the shadows.

Indeed, the recent behavior by Mr. Karzai offers the latest illustration of the central dilemma that faces the Obama administration in Afghanistan: how to influence the actions of an ally who they increasingly regard as unreliable, without undermining America's ultimate goals here.

"We're trying to find this balance of keeping pressure on him, without setting up bluffs that can be called," said a senior official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the delicacy of the matter. "We're coming to terms with dealing with the Karzai we have."

Perhaps the clearest example of the American dilemma is the graft in Mr. Karzai's government. American officials have repeatedly pushed Mr. Karzai to clean up his government, as Mr. Obama stressed during his dinner with the Afghan leader. But Mr. Karzai has resisted all but the most feeble gestures.

Some prominent Afghans say that Mr. Karzai now tells associates that the Americans' goal here is not to build an independent and peaceful Afghanistan, but to exercise their power.

In January, Mr. Karzai invited about two dozen prominent Afghan media and business figures to a lunch at the palace. At the lunch, he expressed a deep cynicism about America's motives, and of the burden he bears in trying to keep the United States at bay.

"He has developed a complete theory of American power," said an Afghan who attended the lunch and who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution. "He believes that America is trying to dominate the region, and that he is the only one who can stand up to them."

Mr. Karzai said that, left alone, he could strike a deal with the Taliban, but that the United States refuses to allow him. The American goal, he said, was to keep the Afghan conflict going, and thereby allow American troops to stay in the country.

The description of the lunch was largely affirmed by two other Afghans who attended and who also declined to be identified. The person who described the meeting said some of the participants urged Mr. Karzai to reconsider his views and his plans to be more assertive with the United States. "We are a poor country," he said. "We are depending on the United States."

Mr. Karzai's ultimate motives are not always clear. It may be that while Mr. Karzai supports the Americans presence here, he believes that distancing himself from the United States plays well among average Afghans.

Though Mr. Karzai won another five-year term last August, he emerged as a badly bruised leader. Amid widespread allegations of fraud, the Election Complaint Commission nullified nearly a million votes counted in his favor. He won after his nearest opponent dropped out of the race.

For their part, officials in the Obama administration have tried to work with Mr. Karzai even as they have seethed over his failure to crack down on corruption. Plans for him to visit Washington were well under way in February, two officials said, when Mr. Karzai issued an order allowing him to handpick all five members of the election panel, which uncovered so much fraud in his re-election.

The move would have deprived the United Nations of any oversight over future Afghan elections. The Obama administration, which had floated several dates for a Karzai visit but not decided on one, decided to delay it, several officials said.

"We wanted to have a great visit," one official said. "But in order to have a great visit, we needed to see four or five things happen."

Last week, under Western pressure, Mr. Karzai backpedaled slightly and agreed to appoint two non-Afghan members to the election commission. Still, Mr. Karzai is reserving the right to appoint the foreigners himself; before, that authority rested with the United Nations. And Mr. Karzai did not restore the spaces once reserved for two other independent members.

Iran is a neighbor of Afghanistan, and American officials say they do not object to the two countries discussing issues of mutual interest. "He can be close to us, have a cooperative bilateral relationship with us, and a good working relationship with his neighborhood," a senior American official said.

But the recent visit by Mr. Ahmadinejad seemed designed to generate as much attention as possible — including in Washington. With Mr. Karzai standing at his side in Kabul, Mr. Ahmadinejad accused the United States of promoting terrorism.

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