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Who will replace Karzai?

By Zia Ur Rehman
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The next two years are very important for Afghanistan. The US and NATO are handing over security responsibilities to the Afghan security forces and this transition will continue probably until 2014. Meanwhile, political parties and coalitions are gearing up for the upcoming presidential election scheduled for the spring of 2014.

President Hamid Karzai is nearing the end of his second term, and the Afghan constitution only allows two terms for a president. Karzai has said he is considering holding presidential elections a year early, in 2013, and does not want to put too much pressure on the country when NATO combat forces are due to leave in 2014. "Either the elections could be brought forward, or the handover of security to Afghan forces could be speeded up," he said in a press conference in Kabul on April 12.

Some Afghan politicians and analysts backed the proposal and warned the 2014 votes might be unfeasible if security declines as NATO troops withdraw. The election should be held while NATO troops are still present, they argue. Others see Karzai's proposal as a worrying admission that the Afghan security forces might not be able to maintain peace in the country.

Analysts believe Karzai is either preparing to run again or backing one of his brothers or close aides as his successor. "An early election would leave little time for electoral reforms to prevent a repeat of the massive ballot-stuffing fraud and use of government resources that marred

Karzai's last victory," said General (r) Abdul Wahid Taqat, a former intelligence officer and a political analyst.

"Early elections can happen if something happens to the president or if the president resigns," said Bashir Alkozai, a senior analyst who monitors Afghanistan's parliamentary politics. "If he moves up elections, Karzai would have to resign and his first vice president, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, would take over. Emergency elections would then have to be scheduled within three months according the country's constitution."

The two largest political oppositions of the country - the National Coalition of Afghanistan (NCA) and the National Front of Afghanistan (NFA) - issued a joint statement on April 30 alleging the Karzai government was 'personalizing' the election institutions and engineering the date and outcome. The NCA is led by Dr Abdullah Abdullah, who was a candidate in the 2009 presidential elections, and Mohammad Younas Qanoni, MP and leader of Afghanistan e Naween (New Afghanistan) political party. The NFA is a political alliance between Ahmad Zia Massoud, former first vice president and brother of late anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the founder of Jombesh Party, and Muhammad Muhaqqiq, a leader of a faction of Hezb-e-Wahdat and a member of parliament from Kabul.

"The early election issue is just a political gimmick with specific objectives," said Sayed Fazel Sancharaki, spokesman for the NCA.

Analysts say Karzai has not decided whom to support as his successor, and he is not likely to, until the last minute. "Gaining the support of Karzai and the international community, especially the US, is essential to winning the vote," said Engineer Kamaal Khan Safi, an MP from Kunduz.

So far, only two people have formally announced that they plan to run for president: Ali Ahmad Jalali, a former interior minister and Fawzia Koofi, the deputy speaker of the Afghan parliament and the first woman to hold that office. Political analysts say neither of candidates is strong.

Karzai's elder brother, Qayyum Karzai, is also said to be planning to enter the race. Sources privy to the plans say Karzai's aides have advised the president to nominate Qayyum as his successor. But Karzai hinted he would not support Qayyum, fearing it may create the impression that he wants to keep the presidency in his own family.

Qayyum, 55, resigned from parliament in 2008 citing poor health. He has also reportedly been involved in back-channel peace diplomacy with the Taliban through Saudi Arabia.

Two other potential candidates are Omar Daudzai, the Afghan ambassador in Pakistan and former chief of staff of the Afghan president, and Farooq Wardak, the education minister. Analysts believe one of them would get Karzai's backing.

"Daudzai, a long time confidant of Karzai, was the man behind the scene who helped bring Muhaqqiq and Dostum into the coalition," said Bashir Alkozai. "If either of these candidates receives Karzai's support, they will also benefit from his financial and political networks."

While it is too early to anticipate, Karzai's voluntary departure before the election will not only sit positively with many Afghans, but will also leave him a respectable legacy in Afghan history, experts say. But they think Karzai wants to remain a Milli Mashar or 'national leader' after quitting. The absence of an alternative keeps the coalition forces dependent on Karzai. "Skillfully navigating the complex regional, tribal and ethnic landscape has been Karzai's strongest ability," said Arif Ansar, an Af-Pak expert at Politact, a Washington-based think tank. "Karzai has masterfully exploited the sensitivities of Pakistan's relations with India and the US and the recently signed Afghansian-India strategic deal is a case in point. When it comes to connecting with the Afghans, Karzai has consistently projected Pakistan as desiring to dominate them and has raised the issue of civilian casualties when it comes to NATO."

The NCA and the NFA have started initial preparations for the presidential elections. It is not known if they will be able to back a joint candidate. "There hasn't been any discussion over joint candidates," said Sancharaki, adding that they don't even know who the potential candidates are.

Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai's top contender in the 2009 presidential elections, and Massoud are likely to be the candidates from the NCA and the NFA respectively.

Some circles believe that Zalmay Khalilzad, the former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the UN, and Hanif Atmar, former interior minister and a leader of Hezb-e-Haq-wa-Edalat (Truth and Justice Party) are also interested in running for president.

Political analysts say the majority of Afghans, who are Pashtuns, will accept the next president if he is a Pashtun from a leading tribe. Karzai was able to hold his own in large part because he is a Pashtun from the southern province of Kandahar, said Israr Ahmed Karimzai, another political analyst. Historically, he said, the south is the region where leaders come from.

"Most people go by what has traditionally been the case in Afghanistan," Arif Ansar said. "Moving forward, it should be what the majority of Afghans think. Although for this to happen, it will require unity amongst Afghans."

Experts say only independent candidates and coalitions are gearing up for the upcoming polls because there are no strong political parties in the country and the democratic system is weak. According to the website of the Afghan Ministry of Justice, there are 84 registered political parties in the country. These parties have been formed by Mujahideen leaders, members of the former People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and some independent figures. But because of a number of contributing factors, the political parties have no visible role in Afghan politics, especially the presidential polls.

"The affiliations of political parties are mostly with their ethnicity, tribes and region, and none of them are truly nationalistic in orientation," said Ansar.

The current Afghan government is structured around coalitions of individuals - former Mujahideen and influential tribal elders - and not around coalitions of political parties, said Bashir Alkozai. "Political parties have been isolated over the past decade, and will therefore not likely to strengthen."