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The Washington Post

Karzai cabinet picks seen as aimed at consolidating power beyond his term

By Sayed Salahuddin and Richard Leiby

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KABUL — Afghan President Hamid Karzai announced his choices for top government security posts Monday, part of a cabinet overhaul that some analysts said better positions him to extend his political influence after his tenure ends in 2014.



Some analysts say Karzai's aims include handpicking a candidate to succeed him — specifically, one of his brothers, Qayum Karzai, who spent years in self-exile in the United States before returning to his homeland.

The government rejected such speculation, calling the cabinet reshuffling part of a normal process, but Karzai's choices are another signal to parliamentary opposition figures that he would find ways to consolidate power with or without their approval.

Karzai, Afghanistan's ruler since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, is under mounting domestic and international pressure to reform his administration, which has been widely criticized for corruption and poor governance. He also faces multiple security challenges, including a reinvigorated insurgency, as U.S. combat troops begin their exit ahead of a 2014 withdrawal deadline.

Karzai's choice to be his new defense minister is former interior minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, a 10-year veteran of his administration whom lawmakers unseated in August.

The parliament also voted no confidence in Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak, a close U.S. ally who had long headed the Defense Ministry.

Parliament disqualified the two ministers for failure to stop protracted cross-border shelling of villages in eastern Afghanistan. Kabul blames the Pakistani army for the mortar attacks, which Pakistan has largely denied, although it recently said they were aimed at fleeing militants.

Mohammadi, the Defense Ministry nominee, is a former Tajik commander from the main faction of warriors whom the United States helped in toppling the Taliban from power. The Tajik bloc is seen as one of the vital factions that will help hold together a government once the United States and its NATO allies leave Afghanistan.

On Monday, the president also nominated veteran police official Mushtaba Patang as interior minister; Assadullah Khalid, the border and tribal affairs minister, as head of the country's spy agency, the National Security Department; and former Kabul governor Azizullah Din Mohammad for Khalid's old post.

Khalid has previously battled allegations of human rights violations in connection with his tenure as governor of southern Kandahar province, where he reportedly ran a private jail. He has denied the accusations and never faced charges.

Karzai's choices are subject to parliamentary approval, but the president has circumvented the lawmakers in the past.

Mohammadi's nomination drew immediate criticism.

"This is really an affront for the parliament to have him appointed as defense minister while he lost his job as the interior minister because he was not good," said retired general Atiqullah Amarkhel.

Amarkhel said Karzai is beholden to the powerful Tajiks and needs key figures such as Mohammadi to protect him when he leaves the presidency — and also to further his hopes of remaining influential in the next election.

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“The changes in the cabinet are mostly to do with the elections,” said Najeeb Mahmoud, a professor of politics at Kabul University. “Karzai wants people loyal to him to be in charge of top positions. They show that the president and his team mostly think about themselves and the election.”

A government spokesman, Rafi Ferdous, denied any link to the 2014 election. He also said further administration changes would be forthcoming, but offered no specifics.

Future reshuffling appears likely to include the chief of the election commission, the attorney general, the finance minister and the chief justice of the country’s Supreme Court.