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CBS News

Karzai Nailed by Political 1-2 Punch

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The latest round of Afghanistan's political boxing match has left President Hamid Karzai a bloody nose.

He came out swinging at the country's elected lawmakers last week by delaying the opening of parliament for a month. Karzai said he wanted to wait for the findings of a special court he set up to investigate allegations of fraud in the September 18 parliamentary elections -- elections which saw a number of the president's foes win seats.

Afghan election authorities and lawmakers consider the new court unconstitutional, and Karzai's critics say he wants to use the new court to get rid of opposition legislators. The presidential palace denies the accusation.

Karzai's special court was created after the United Nations-backed Election Complaints Commission had already wrapped up its own investigation into allegations of electoral fraud in Afghanistan.

So the parliamentarians fought back, threatening to open the parliament without him and demanding that the special court be closed. Several days of intense negotiations followed, and Karzai reluctantly agreed to officially open parliament on Wednesday, but his special court remains in place and will continue its investigations.

But the standoff with parliament dealt Karzai a secondary blow. The international community, including Washington, backed the parliamentarians in the standoff, not President Karzai.

The United Nations expressed "deep concern" with the president's plan to postpone the opening of parliament. Coalition forces feared the delay would only fuel instability and violence, and when Karzai finally agreed to attend Wednesday's inauguration of the new parliament, the U.S. Embassy released a statement supporting the move:

"The outcome ultimately reached demonstrates respect for democratic governance and for the separation of powers set forth in the Afghan Constitution. The outcome of these discussions also recognizes the importance of the timely seating of the nation's parliamentarians so they can begin their vital work of serving the Afghan people."

This won't likely be that last political punch-up here. The new parliament is seen as more defiant than the previous one, and more confrontations between the president and lawmakers are expected.

The September elections saw very low voter turnout, especially in areas of insecurity -- largely the restive south and east of the country. Those regions are also predominately Pashtun -- Karzai's tribe. Other Afghan tribes; Tajiks, Hazara and Uzbeks, make up a much greater share of the new parliament than they have in the past.

In many ways, the parliament has proven to be the only real check on Karzai's power. Last year, they voted down many of his cabinet choices.

So forgive President Karzai if he isn't on fighting form at the parliamentary inauguration on Wednesday. He's probably feeling a bit bruised.