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Political

سیاسی

Bush's 'puppet in Kabul' will not go quietly

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By Patrick Cockburn

Hamid Karzai is fighting for his political life. He has often been written off as "the mayor of Kabul", but he does not intend to go quietly just because the Pentagon has increasingly seen him as an obstacle to its plans for a "surge" or increase in US troop strength by 20,000 or 30,000 to try to turn the corner in the Afghan war.

Karzai's weaknesses are well known. He did not have his own party and is dependent on the US. His younger brother is believed to be one of the leading figures in the drug business. In the early years of his presidency, the US cultivated the Afghan warlords as allies, ignoring the fact that popular hostility to the warlords had been one of the causes of the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. No doubt Karzai has been ineffectual, but would anybody else do any better?

In response to what he deems to be moves to replace him or make sure that he does not stand again for the presidency in elections later this year, Karzai has been burnishing his nationalist credentials. At the opening session of the Afghan parliament, he criticised the US-led coalition for its conduct of the war, disregard for Afghan casualties of air strikes, its bypassing of the government, links to warlords and tolerance of drug traffickers. All this is strange behavior for a man seen by many Afghans as a puppet of the US.

Overall, Karzai is critical of the "surge" and with good reason. It will probably lead to intensified fighting in Afghanistan. The US-led coalition may be able to hold more ground but a greater foreign military presence may also lead to an Afghan nationalist

backlash. A new US-backed candidate put forward for election might simply further discredit the government in Kabul as a foreign pawn.

Karzai has been demanding greater control over allied operations. The Pentagon's enthusiasm for a surge in US troop numbers may be based on a false belief that it was this which transformed the war in Iraq. What really brought Iraq's Sunni insurgency to an end was not extra US troops but fear on the part of the Sunni that they were being ethnically cleansed by the Shia majority. It is difficult to see the Taliban being defeated so long as they are able to base themselves across the border in Pakistan. It is also unlikely that the Pakistani army will ever abandon the Taliban as one of its few assets in the region, particularly at a time of increased tension with India. Karzai has become increasingly close to Delhi and the US has not relished his denunciations of Pakistan.