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Once-docile Afghan parliament stands up to Karzai and becomes an ally of U.S.

By Griff Witte

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The Afghan parliament, long a bastion of dysfunction and docility, has emerged this spring as a robust check on President Hamid Karzai's power, giving the United States an unlikely ally as it tries to persuade the government here to clean up its act.

Although the United States and the parliament do not appear to be directly coordinating their strategies, their interests coincide. Both are pushing the increasingly erratic Karzai to become more accountable, to allow fair elections, and to reduce the corruption that has withered support for the government, feeding the Taliban's rise.

But unlike the United States, which had to retreat this month after public rebukes of Karzai backfired, many members of parliament say that openly defying the president makes for good election-year politics.

In recent months, the parliament has rejected Karzai's budget, much of his cabinet and, most important, his proposal to overhaul the nation's election law. Karzai's proposed changes would have, among other things, given him control of a commission assigned to investigate fraud allegations. The United States, the United Nations and many Afghans viewed the proposal as an attempted power grab and were relieved when the lower house of parliament voted overwhelmingly against it. Even Karzai's staunch supporters defied him, waving red cards to signify their opposition to the president's maneuver.

"We were all surprised at the unanimity of opinion in the lower house," said one Western diplomat. "It's really unprecedented."

Despite the vote, Karzai had insisted that his version of the law take effect. But on Saturday, he backed down, agreeing to a compromise with the United Nations under which two of five members of the fraud commission will be foreigners, with each given veto power over commission decisions. Karzai also appointed a chief election commissioner who is seen as more independent than his predecessor.

The changes are important because Afghans are due at the polls in just five months for the country's first parliamentary elections since 2005. Karzai's critics say his original election law proposal would have enabled him to stock the parliament with allies and further consolidate authority in a government that lacks rival centers of influence. They say that after the fraud-marred presidential vote last year, the country's fragile democracy would not survive similarly tainted parliamentary elections.

"The parliamentary election is a matter of life and death in terms of democracy in Afghanistan," said Mirwais Yasini, the parliament's deputy speaker and a losing candidate in last year's presidential vote.

Yasini said he was pleased with the compromise reached Saturday. But parliament members remain wary of attempts by Karzai and his allies to try to rig the outcome of the elections.

A powerful president

Despite Afghanistan's long history of decentralized power, the constitution that the United States helped craft for the post-Taliban era gives the president vast sway at all levels of government. That has caused problems for the Obama administration as it has become disenchanted with Karzai and has sought unsuccessfully to work around him.

Afghanistan's ministers, governors and district chiefs all ultimately answer to the president, giving Washington little leverage in Afghanistan when Karzai chooses not to cooperate with U.S. plans. The parliament, however, is relatively independent. Karzai appoints some members of the upper house but has no direct authority over those in the more influential lower house, who are popularly elected.

Until now, the parliament was more notorious than influential, rarely challenging the president and gaining notice only for its unorthodox legislation. Last year, it passed a law that requires minority Shiite women to seek permission from their husbands before leaving the home and to submit to their husbands' sexual demands unless ill or menstruating.

Reformist lawmakers

The parliament remains a rogues' gallery of drug barons, criminals and warlords. Many members are uneducated and even illiterate. But the complexion of parliament has shifted over the past year, as the warlords lost interest and a group of reformers -- including many women --

coalesced into a working group of approximately 30 that increasingly drives the body's agenda, members say.

Many of the reformers are strongly in favor of the U.S. role here and have been unsettled by Karzai's recent statements that appeared to attack the foreign presence. "We need U.S. support. If they don't support us for one day, we cannot survive to the next day," said Moeen Marastial, a parliament member who advised Karzai's reelection campaign last year.

Karzai's allies say he is convinced that parliament and Washington are working together to undermine him. After the election law changes were rejected, he angrily told a group of parliament members that "I expect you to act like Afghans, but you're behaving like Americans," according to one member present.

That member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, adamantly denied that the parliament takes direction from the United States but said members do occasionally consult the U.S. Embassy here.

It would be difficult for anyone to dictate an agenda to the parliament, which includes communists, tribal elders, former Taliban members and Western-educated technocrats. Because there are no formal political parties in Afghanistan, coalitions are loose and shifting. The speaker of the lower house, Yunus Qanooni, is one of Karzai's chief rivals, but he does not command a majority.

Fawzia Koofi, one of 68 female members of the lower house, said the four-year-old parliament has become more assertive as members have come to recognize their powers. She said members also know that Karzai is deeply unpopular and that "when you talk against this government, people will vote for you."

Among the parliament's powers is the ability to impeach the president. Analysts say that is unlikely to happen because Karzai has significant leverage over members through the billions of dollars in U.S. assistance that his government directly or indirectly controls.

Still, Haroun Mir, the director of Afghanistan's Center for Research and Policy Studies, said the parliament can have a significant impact on Karzai's agenda, which is why he is working hard to influence the next elections. "Karzai has been very smart about making the political opposition irrelevant over the past eight years," Mir said. "The only way to have checks and balances in Afghanistan is through the parliament."