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## Karzai gains from opposition's disarray

By Killid Correspondents  
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KABUL - After a series of well-known Afghan politicians announced their candidacy, the upcoming presidential [election](#) was widely expected to become a turning-point in the country's history. But most of the big names have declined to register, leaving what critics say is a weak challenge to [President Hamid Karzai's](#) re-election.

Although Karzai is widely said to be ineffective, many analysts expect that the divisions in the opposition will lead to him winning a landslide in the elections, scheduled for August 20. This raises the question - why did Karzai's opponents back down?

Critics allege that the opposition to Karzai - a collection of [former government officials](#), businessmen and warlords - were unable to decide on a united stance, and that the leading contenders – Gul Agha Sherzai, Ashraf Ghani, Ahmed Ali Jalali - were unable to choose a common representative.

"Everyone has an ego and no one wanted to allow anyone else to take the center stage," said Jalali, the former interior minister.

Many say that candidates will peddle their support for privilege and fame. "As soon as weak candidates realize that they can't win the election [alone], they will give their votes to a more powerful candidate and in return they will ask for some privileges," according to Said Jawad Hussaini, president of the Afghanistan-e-Jawan party.

For other potential candidates, the issue might have been losing privileges, not gaining them. For instance, Zalmay Khalilzad, former US ambassador to Kabul, was widely rumored to be a top contender for the presidency.

Numerous tribal groups held demonstrations in favor of his candidacy, and he even convened a

large meeting in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates to discuss Afghan politics and reconstruction. But analysts say that he may have decided against running as under the Afghan constitution he would have to relinquish his American citizenship to do so.

Similar sentiments might have forced Jalali, another American citizen, from giving up his candidacy. It is also widely rumored that Jalali and another candidate, Anwar-ul-haq Ahadi, quit the race because of files the Afghan security forces have on them that they were reluctant to have open to public scrutiny. Jalali's chief of staff, Ajmal Shinwari, denies such accusations.

Rafiq Ahmad Shaheer, a lecturer at Herat University, said Ahadi might have been dissuaded from running because of pressure from his party, the Pashtun-nationalist group Afghan Millat.

Karzai's deft maneuvering has also stymied the opposition. Karzai replaced his first [vice president](#), Ahmad Zia Massoud, with Qasim Fahim, in a move that split the opposition. Fahim is a leading figure associated with the United Front, and it is widely believed that Karzai gave him a vice presidential seat to ensure his support.

"Karzai chose him because he wanted to weaken the National United Front and gain the support of jihadi leaders," said Dr Muhajudin Mehdi, a political observer.

Karzai's move is also in keeping with the time-honored tradition of balancing out the representation from various ethnic groups. "This is why candidates are trying to choose their [vice presidential candidates](#) from other ethnic groups," said Abdullah Uruzgani, a researcher and member of the Andisha Foundation, a think-tank.

Karzai is playing the game deftly, he said, and other candidates have not been able to use vice presidential appointments to their advantage, he adds. "Ashraf Ghani was expected to choose powerful vice presidents, but on the contrary, he chose some not very well-known people and this shows that he is not serious," Uruzgani said.

Most of the candidates lack a support network within the country, while Karzai has built just a strong network over the last few years.

Karzai is thought to have the backing of many tribal elders, *ulema* (scholars), and other influential figures, who can mobilize support for him come election time. Jalali, Ghani and Khalilzad all live in the United States, making it difficult to cultivate such support networks here.

Moreover, many candidates may have lacked international backing as well. In an age where political support from international countries is crucial, this may have further discouraged some from running.

"The candidates' resignations show that important decisions in Afghanistan cannot be made independently," said Ghulam Mujtaba Rasoli, an Afghan political expert. "The support of powerful countries has a role in every decision made in Afghanistan, including the presidential election."

"Although the fourth article of the Afghan constitution claims the right of sovereignty for its people," he adds, "we can not deny the influences of some foreign and neighboring countries. Considering the decades of war in Afghanistan it is impossible to make decisions independently, which is a striking example of what I am talking about."

Most importantly, the US could not find another candidate to back, despite trying.

The Obama administration has proved much more critical of Karzai than the previous administration, and in many cases officials have openly criticized the Afghan president. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called Afghanistan a "narco state" and Obama has said that "Karzai should get out of from under his bunker and attend to his country".

A recent report from the London's Guardian newspaper declared that US officials were trying to limit Karzai's power by appointing a [prime minister](#). This did not succeed and the US was left without options or alternatives in Afghanistan. Experts say that none of the other major candidates received US backing, something that also dissuaded them from running.

The result of most leading candidates dropping out of the race is that most experts believe that Karzai will easily win the election. "Without any opposition, and with his support networks in place, Karzai will have an easy time in August," said Haroun Mir, a policy analyst with the Afghanistan Center for Research and Policy Studies.

"Karzai is a very clever politician," he adds. "No one has been able to beat him, and he has proven that even if he can't run the country well, he can certainly play politics well."