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Karzai Appoints Brother in Kandahar

By Maria Abi-Habib, Habib Khan

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KABUL—The Afghan president Wednesday named a little-known half-brother to oversee and protect the family's influence in southern Afghanistan, attempting to fill the vacuum left by the slaying of his half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai.

Still, many tribal elders said the Karzai family's authority suffered irreparable damage after Tuesday's assassination of Ahmed Wali Karzai, the provincial council chief in the strategic Kandahar province that is the birthplace of both the Taliban and the Karzai clan.

President Hamid Karzai named Shah Wali Karzai as head of the Popolzai tribe, which includes the Karzai clan, after attending the funeral Wednesday in Karz, the family's ancestral village on the outskirts of Kandahar city.

"Ahmed Wali was a personality of national standing. For Shah Wali to get his stature will take a long time," said Niyaz Mohammed Serhadi, governor of the Zhari district of Kandahar, a key battlefield against the Taliban.

Maintaining President Karzai's authority over Kandahar and surrounding provinces is a key goal of the U.S. and allies. Most of the 30,000 surge troops President Barack Obama dispatched to Afghanistan were deployed in the south, aiming to extend the Afghan government's authority and destroy parallel administrations established by the Taliban. Ahmed Wali Karzai was a key partner of the U.S. military and intelligence in that effort.

In 1982, Shah Wali Karzai fled the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan for the U.S., where he studied civil and mechanical engineering at the University of Maryland. He moved to Quetta, Pakistan, in 2000, and settled in Kandahar in 2002.

During the past decade, he worked as a close aide to Ahmed Wali Karzai, helping from behind the scenes to build the family's business empire, which spans security, logistics and real estate. Ahmed Wali, the most influential power-broker in south Afghanistan, was also accused of involvement in the opium trade, allegations he repeatedly rejected.

Shah Wali Karzai could not be reached Wednesday for comment.

Shah Wali "is not Ahmed Wali. He is not as well-known and is not as influential," said Mohammad Hassan Andiwal, the former police chief of Helmand province, which borders Kandahar. "Without doubt [his death] will positively affect the Taliban's morale."

Though the Taliban claimed responsibility for Ahmed Wali Karzai's killing by a trusted security aide, family associates say the slaying was likely caused by a personal disagreement. The assassin was gunned down by his bodyguards.

Without Ahmed Wali Karzai's muscle, the Karzai family would be in a much weaker position in the presidential elections slated for 2014 and in other electoral contests. Though President Karzai is not technically allowed to run again, some of his supporters said he could retain power through constitutional changes that may be passed by a specially elected assembly, the loya jirga.

International observers have charged that Ahmed Wali Karzai played a crucial role in the ballot-stuffing across southern Afghanistan that ensured President Karzai's re-election in 2009 and in the fraud in last year's parliamentary elections.

"President Karzai became president because of Ahmed Wali," said Abdul Khaliq Achakzai, a parliamentarian and leader of the rival Achakzai tribe in Kandahar. "With Ahmed Wali gone, it will be harder for President Karzai to get votes for his family members and supporters in greater Kandahar."

Tribal elders said Shah Wali Karzai is also not as well-versed as Ahmed Wali Karzai in the south's complicated tribal structure. Ahmed Wali Karzai was successful in maintaining support by ensuring most tribes received a cut of the money floating around the south, mostly from the billions of dollars spent by the international community, a Western official based in Kandahar said.

The only anti-Taliban politician who could really match Ahmed Wali Karzai's power in Kandahar is former warlord Gul Agha Sherzai, currently governor of eastern Nangarhar province. Mr. Sherzai is the former governor of Kandahar, and his transfer by President Karzai to Nangarhar allowed Ahmed Wali Karzai to consolidate the family's authority over the province. Mr. Sherzai flew to Kandahar for the funeral.

In a separate development Wednesday, five French troops were killed in eastern Afghanistan.

The deaths bring to 25 the number of international troops killed so far this month, according to icasualties.org, an independent monitoring website. So far this year, at least 306 troops have died; 215 of those have been American.