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Mixed Signals From Administration; Support for Karzai Despite Corruption

09/28/2009

By Adele M. Stan

With no good way out of Afghanistan and no good way to stay in, Obama's team of rivals sends mixed signals on the U.S.'s next move.

Nobody disputes the fact that the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai is corrupt. Yet the U.S. leaders and the heads of other Western governments seem resigned to dealing with the devil they know.

The Washington Post today reports that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the leaders of other NATO nations "have told President Hamid Karzai's government that they expect him to remain in office for another five-year term and will work with him on an expanded campaign to turn insurgent fighters against the Taliban and other militant groups." Never mind the allegations of widespread fraud and ballot-stuffing in the the August 20 Afghan presidential election.

But, as one friend in Afghanistan put it to me, with a note of bitter irony, "At least the fact that the fraud was so widespread means a lot of people all over the country worked really hard to steal that election. So he's not without support."

From the Washington Post:

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and other NATO foreign ministers, meeting Friday in New York with their Afghan counterpart, reached "consensus" that Karzai would probably "continue to be president," whether through a runoff or as the legitimate winner of more than 50 percent of votes cast in disputed Aug. 20 elections, an Obama administration official said.

Among the things that Karzai did on election day was to shut down the Afghan media, and to

shut out all media from polling places. The reason stated by the Afghan government for the media black-out was that they didn't want reports of polling-station violence to deter voters from casting ballots.

And indeed there was violence. It just wasn't that big a deal, a friend who was on the ground that day explained, because so few people turned out to cast the ballots that stuffed the boxes.

So, you're probably thinking that I'm against the NATO plan to deal with Karzai. Not really. An Afghanistan with no leader for any length of time is hardly preferable to an Afghanistan with a corrupt leader. Former President Bill Clinton, interviewed by NBC's David Gregory this weekend on Meet the Press, suggested that Karzai should include the other leading presidential candidates in the disputed election in his government. It's probably a good idea. When corruption gets old, a little co-option can go a long way.