

Kabul Bids Farewell to Powerful Friend

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Departing United States ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad has played a major role in formation of the current government.

The announcement earlier this month that United States ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad is leaving his post in Kabul to become the US envoy to Iraq has stunned many in the Afghan capital.

The Afghan-born diplomat, commonly known as the “viceroy”, has wielded extraordinary power since he was first appointed as a US special presidential envoy following the fall of the Taleban in late 2001.

He was instrumental in helping set up the interim government and was intimately involved in last year’s presidential election.

But some argue that he has been too deeply embroiled in the country’s political process.

“Khalilzad was an Afghan and was familiar with the Afghan character,” said Mohammad Sediq Patman, a political analyst and member of the commission that drafted the new constitution. “He was the only ambassador whom people could contact directly.”

Khalilzad was born in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1951. An ethnic Pashtun, he is fluent in both Dari and Pashtu. He was educated in Lebanon and the US, and earned a doctorate in political science from the University of Chicago in 1979.

Considered a Washington insider, Khalilzad served in the Reagan administration as well as under both former president George Bush senior and the current president.

“Khalilzad was extremely successful in carrying out his mission in Afghanistan, and because of that the US government has decided to send him to Iraq to get the situation there under control,” said Patman.

But some analysts say that Khalilzad, who became ambassador in November 2003 after serving nearly two years as special envoy, had too much authority and sometimes overshadowed President Hamed Karzai.

“Khalilzad was interfering in the political and national affairs of our country, disregarding the will of the people,” said Bashir Bezhen, a spokesman for the Kangara-e-Milli, or National Congress party. Bezhen accused Khalilzad of fanning political and ethnic tension by expressing clear preference for Karzai during the presidential elections.

“If we’d had a non-Afghan [US envoy], he would have been more impartial,” said Bezhen, who claims Khalilzad was removed in response to a request from his party, an assertion few other observers would take seriously.

Shukria Barakzai, a political analyst who served as a member of the constitutional drafting commission, agreed that Khalilzad’s legacy was somewhat ambiguous.

"Khalilzad's interference in the internal affairs of our country was unacceptable to Afghans," she told IWPR. She said the US ambassador exerted direct influence on members of the constitutional commission during the drafting process and played the role of kingmaker during the presidential elections in October 2004.

But on balance, Barakzai rates Khalilzad's contribution as positive. For one thing, she said, Khalilzad played an extremely important role in maintaining security, preventing neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran from trying too hard to gain a foothold.

This influence, said Barakzai, was due as much to Khalilzad's background as to the prominence of his adopted country.

"Khalilzad's presence in Afghanistan was unacceptable to our neighbours, because they saw Khalilzad as an Afghan, not just as the White House envoy," she said.

Khalilzad has been closely involved in Afghan affairs for many years. At the State Department from 1985 to 1989, he pushed hard for more aid for the mujahedin who were fighting Soviet forces, Washington's Cold War enemy. It was this extra influx of cash and military aid, including Stinger missiles, that many observers credit with turning the tide of the war, leading to the Soviets withdrawal in 1989.

Khalilzad's long involvement with his homeland has been controversial at times. His past role as a consultant to the US oil giant Unocal in the Nineties raised eyebrows when he was appointed ambassador, as did his defence of the Taleban in the years before Osama Bin Laden emerged as the Islamic regime's most notorious guest and ally.

Fazul Rahman Orya, a political analyst, does not dispute the charges that there was some diplomatic meddling, but says Khalilzad just did what was necessary.

"Our country needed someone to help formulate its foreign and domestic policies, and Khalilzad was very useful in this regard," he said.

Orya believes that Khalilzad's departure could actually be a positive development for Afghanistan, since whoever follows him will be able to set new priorities. "The new ambassador will most likely focus on civil society rather than the warlords," he said.

Others wish the ambassador could have stayed a bit longer.

The head of the supreme court, Fazal Hadi Shinwari, sent an open letter to the US Congress, asking that Khalilzad's mission be extended through the parliamentary elections currently scheduled for September 18. His request elicited strong reactions from Afghan political parties and observers, who grumbled that the supreme court had no business interfering with US political decisions.

Shinwari defended his move, saying that he had issued the plea not as a member of the supreme court, but as head of the nation's ulema, or council of religious scholars.

Sentiment on the street seems to show that Khalilzad will be missed.

Reflecting the general mood, Sardar Mohammad, 40, a resident of Kabul’s downtown Shahr-e-Naw district, told IWPR, “As an Afghan, Khalilzad worked hard for the reconstruction of the country. I don’t know how the new ambassador will be, but Khalilzad was certainly good for Afghanistan.”

No new ambassador has been named as yet.

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