

## **Karzai Facing Stiff Challenges**

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Afghanistan's prime minister Hamid Karzai is a popular leader but has he got what it takes to turn his devastated country around?

The ravaged streets and shattered infrastructure of Kabul offer ample evidence to anyone who wants to see the devastation which two decades of fratricidal civil war has wrought on Afghanistan.

The mere presence of an interim government under the leadership of Hamed Karzai has been enough to bring a ray of hope to this devastated country, although as one Kabuli resident noted, "he is a decent man but not a magician".

Observers all agree that Karzai is a good choice. As his administration embarks on the long slow process of rebuilding the country from scratch, this respected, influential figure could potentially earn the loyalty of large numbers of Afghans.

I met Karzai in Kabul on the day he became interim prime minister. In his early forties, he has considerable charm and expresses his views in a moderate way.

A fluent English speaker, with a master's degree in political science from an Indian university, he is thoroughly familiar with Western political thought and culture. However, keen to express his affinity with Afghan culture, he wears a northern Afghan-style hat, along with the kind of robe worn by religious people. He speaks both the official languages of Afghanistan, Persian and Pashtu.

Karzai served as a deputy foreign minister in Afghanistan's first mujahedin government in 1992. When the Taleban burst on to the Afghan political scene in the early 1990s, he initially supported them, but soon became suspicious and disillusioned with their policies. He left his home town, the Taleban stronghold of Kandahar, for the Pakistani city of Quetta, from where he travelled to the US and Europe. Two years ago his father was assassinated, in a murder widely attributed to the Taleban.

Last October, Karzai slipped across the border into Afghanistan to rally support for the former king Zahir Shah's plans to build a broad-based government through the convention of a grand tribal assembly or Loya Jirga. It was a daring move. He evaded a Taleban attempt to capture him in Uruzgan province and his forces engaged the Taleban near their last remaining stronghold, the southern city of Kandahar.

Since taking office on December 22, Karzai has repeated that the security and reconstruction of the country are his top priorities during the six month interim period. In interviews and more recently in his TV and radio broadcasts, he has stressed the importance of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and promised to do his best to reduce the power of the warlords.

Karzai faces a number of challenges, not least the need to deal and reach compromises with local military commanders unwilling to relinquish power. He must also find a way of convincing the various armed factions that disarmament must take place across the country.

His task is made even harder by the continuing presence of some Taleban and al-Qaeda members hiding in Afghanistan.

Karzai has succeeded in winning the loyalty of many key warlords, but this is partly the product of international - and more specifically, US - pressure. How long their allegiance will last remains to be seen.

The other main challenge is how best to deal with the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF. Different opinions have emerged from within the interim government over how long their mission should last.

Reviving the Afghan economy and creating job opportunities for people who have been deprived of the most basic education and health provision will not be easy either. Droughts and natural disasters over the last three years have only increased the level of poverty.

Karzai is engaged in a race against time. He must endeavour to achieve as many of his goals as possible within the six-month period of the interim administration, to pave the way for the emergency Loya Jirga which is scheduled to be inaugurated by the former Afghan king.

But the outlook is not as bleak as some of his detractors claim. As he attempts to tackle the huge difficulties facing the country, he enjoys the support and goodwill of the international community. Afghanistan's immediate neighbours are united - probably for the first time in many decades - in a pledge not to undermine his administration. They are even willing to see him set up a national army in order to establish the security necessary for the reconstruction of the country.

The Tokyo conference for the reconstruction of Afghanistan is seen as a signal of widespread international support for Karzai. Not only has the World Bank already announced assistance for the interim administration, many Western countries have also reopened their embassies or contributed to the peace force for the country. These developments have made Afghans optimistic, an optimism which has prompted them to look upon Karzai as a natural leader of Afghanistan.

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