

No-Show Karzai Disappoints Helmandis

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Incumbent president may have lost quite a few votes when he failed to appear at campaign rally. The preparations had gone on all night - workmen hammering together a stage, hanging posters, and erecting a tent over Karzai stadium, named after the Afghan president.

Rows and rows of chairs were brought in, and lunch was prepared for 10,000 people.

It's not every day that Helmand province, centre of poppy, insurgency, and international forces, gets a visit from the country's leader. But local residents had been told that Saturday, August 15, was going to be special. Karzai was coming to Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, to ask the people for their votes in the August 20 presidential elections.

A large crowd, including women and children, was gathered under the tent by 9 am, waiting for their president to appear. They were still there an hour later, but Karzai had not shown up.

Shortly after 10.30 local officials filed in. They included Karzai's provincial campaign manager, Amir Mohammad Akhundzada, along with his big brother, the former governor of Helmand, the highly controversial Sher Mohammad Akhundzada.

Sher Mohammad was sacked at the insistence of the British in late 2005, after nine tonnes of poppy paste was discovered in his office. Karzai has often said that getting rid of Sher Mohammad was one of his biggest errors - after the tough governor was fired, security in the province went rapidly downhill.

But Sher Mohammad apparently harboured no hard feelings: Karzai made him a senator, and brought him to Kabul. Now he was back home, campaigning for the incumbent president.

Alishah Mazlumyar, head of the information and culture department, opened the ceremonies. He promptly cast a pall over the proceedings by announcing that Karzai was not likely to come.

People near the entrance began to leave.

Suddenly Amir Mohammad Akhundzada took his phone out of his pocket, held it up to the microphone, and the crowd heard the voice of the president.

"Helmandis! Brothers and sisters! Hello!" Karzai then delivered a short speech, outlining his plans for talks with the Taleban, promising to help solve Helmand's security problems, and appealing for votes.

"I am also feeling the sorrows of the Helmandis," Karzai said. "Give me enough votes so that I can become president and then I can think about how to deal with all of these difficulties."

Helmand residents may be forgiven for being sceptical. The province has been a war zone for the past three years. Since major military operations began in early July, the capital has been rocketed daily, while gunfire is frequently heard in outlying neighbourhoods.

The day before Karzai's scheduled appearance, a suicide car bomber blew himself up in front of the Afghan National Army base in the Tor Tank area of Lashkar Gah, badly injuring two children and two ANA soldiers.

This, apparently, was too much for Karzai.

"The president cancelled his trip due to some security concerns," Sher Mohammad said. "But I will definitely get your voices to the president. We are tired of this continuous war.

"We are asking for education, security, and reconstruction from the next president. We also ask him to give major government posts to Helmandis as he does for people of other provinces."

But the audience was not eager to listen to Sher Mohammad or to the other speakers. Despite his appeals for quiet, people began to talk among themselves.

Amir Mohammad Akhundzada looked a bit stressed by the entire affair.

"It was a good thing that Karzai at least called," he said, his eyes red-rimmed. "Otherwise, how could I face these people?"

The campaign rally had cost a lot of money, he added, and Karzai would have been very happy to see how many people wanted to hear him speak.

"All of this was ruined because of security," he said.

With the elections only days away, security is a major concern in Helmand. The province has been the site of two major military operations, Dagger Thrust and Panther's Claw, designed to rid the area of the insurgents and allow Helmandis to vote in peace.

Helmand authorities have announced that the elections will be held in a secure environment, with more than 2,000 police, hundreds of ANA soldiers and thousands more foreign troops for back-up.

"I am informing Helmandis that they will have security on election day," Assadullah Sherzad, police chief of Helmand, said. "At the moment, more than 2,000 police are ready to guarantee the security of the polling centres."

According Engineer Abdul Hadi, head of the local election commission, there will be 107 polling centres in

Helmand. Just a little over one week ago his estimate had been 222 – but the centres would have been in areas too volatile to patrol. Many of Helmand’s residents will not have the possibility of casting their ballots, even if they wanted to.

Shirin Del, a tribal leader in Helmand, said that last week’s car bomb and the rockets showed that the Taleban had a plan for the elections.

“Nobody can prevent them,” he said. “These security forces could not protect Karzai. How can they protect me?”

Lashkar Gah has proved inhospitable to other presidential candidates as well. When Shahnawaz Tanai, one of the less prominent of this crop of contenders, visited Helmand in late July, an irate spectator threw shoes at him, repeating the indignity suffered by then US president George W Bush in Baghdad last December.

Karzai, it seems, did not do himself any favours with the Helmand electorate.

“I am not going to vote for anybody,” said one disgruntled resident, leaving the stadium. “Karzai has not paid any attention to us for the past five years.”

One man who is definitely not going to go to the polls for Karzai is the labourer who put up the stage.

“That damned Karzai,” he grumbled. “I worked all night on that stage, for very little money. I wish I had not done it.”

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