

DANCES WITH WARLORDS: KARZAI'S LATEST GRIST FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL RUMOR MILL

Abdurrab Rasul Sayyaf is the latest name to have been floated as President Hamid Karzai's favored contender for the 2014 Afghan Presidential Elections. Sayyaf's veteran status amongst Afghanistan's political elite, his close proximity to the president, and his apparent eagerness to be in the vanguard of developing a "national consensus" prior to the election makes this a potentially noteworthy development. However, while Karzai may decisively back Sayyaf come April 2014, the rumor is a more likely indicator of the president's current state of mind and his prodigious capacity for political manipulation ahead of the vote.

The latest candidate in a long line of aspirants to be anointed President Karzai's "maybe-possibly-could-very-well-be" preferred successor was announced after an hours-long conclave in early August between the Afghan head of state and a group of the country's most prominent powerbrokers and politicians. The news that Abdurrab Rasul Sayyaf, an Islamic fundamentalist and one-time associate of Osama bin Laden, may have been given the official presidential nod generated a maelstrom of international consternation and diplomatic hand-wringing. The Presidential Palace was quick to distance itself from the media coverage that proclaimed Sayyaf as Karzai's chosen political heir. Aimal Faizi, the Presidential spokesman, underscored in no uncertain terms that the President "has not supported any presidential candidate and will not do [so] in the future either."¹ The principal source for the rumor appeared to be Sayed Fazl Sancharaki, the spokesman for the National Coalition of Afghanistan (NCA), a Tajik-dominated opposition party whose leader, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, has indicated that he may once again attempt to compete for the highest office in the land.

That Karzai may be privately floating different candidates to gauge internal and external reactions, or that his opposition is simply intent on discrediting him, are both possible explanations. Another distinct, if more mundane, possibility is that as the open period for candidate registration draws nearer, any passing utterance

on the president's part stands a greater chance of being interpreted as dictum. Less than a month previously, Sayyaf was being spoken of as the preferred candidate for one of the President's opposition alliances. Kabul, as one international diplomat described it, is "a cauldron of suspicion and rumor at the moment, which we expect will last throughout the elections period."² However, Sayyaf's veteran profile amongst Afghanistan's political elite, his close proximity to the president, and his apparent eagerness to be in the vanguard of developing a "national consensus" prior to the election makes this a potentially noteworthy development.

Abdurrab Rasul Sayyaf, an ethnic Pashtun, was one of the founders of Afghanistan's Islamist movement and a member of the "Peshawar Seven," the eponymous name given to the Pakistan-based mujahideen groups who battled against the Soviets. There he founded Ittehad-i Islami, or Islamic Union, a Saudi Arabian-backed political-military organization forged in the early days of the anti-Soviet jihad. Sayyaf's Islamic fundamentalism, his Wahhabi religious predilections, and his impeccable Arabic language skills attracted Saudi-sponsored weapons and funds that were then funneled to training camps in Pakistan and to his native stronghold in Paghman district of Kabul province.³ Sayyaf's variegated past includes accusations of human rights atrocities committed during Afghanistan's brutal civil war from 1992-1996 and his facilitation of Osama bin Laden's return to the

country in 1996. His early career achievements include mentoring 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad and founding Da'wa al-Jihad, a university established in an Afghan refugee camp that became known as the "pre-eminent school for terrorism," so much so that an Abu Sayyaf terrorist organization was founded in his name in the Philippines.⁴ Nevertheless, Sayyaf was one of the few religious hardliners who joined the Northern Alliance in defiance of the Taliban.⁵ Today, he vigorously denounces terrorism and the Taliban's frequent suicide attacks. Like other former Northern Alliance commanders, he has expressed wariness about rushing into reconciliation talks with the Taliban, despite serving on the High Peace Council. At an event to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud in 2011, Sayyaf remarked that,

"I believe that this jihad has united this nation from the north to the south and from the east to the west and united the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Nurestani, Turkmen and Aimaq and Baluch in a way that if they [enemies] push them down from the peaks of the Hindu Kush hundreds of times, they will not disunite and disintegrate. Therefore, since you are alive, you must be prepared. You must remove the notion from your mind that prosperity and peace will return to the country during our lifetime or during those of our children with the presence of these cunning enemies and the deceived foes."⁶

In recent days, Sayyaf has indicated his intention to host a political gathering to discuss the upcoming presidential election. Members of Sayyaf's political party, revamped as the Islamic Da'wa (Call) Party of Afghanistan in 2005, confirmed that their leader "will share his views with the political parties and the Afghans about the presidential election" at the same time that they demurred on the question of whether he would actually run for office. If President Karzai has indeed requested that Sayyaf enter the fray, the move raises the question, why? Sayyaf's burnished Islamic and jihadist credentials confer on him an inherent advantage in Afghanistan's political melee, where many, if not most, influential politicians claim some

connection to the country's various resistance movements. His contacts within the clergy, his Pashtun roots, and his affiliation with the Northern Alliance make him a natural bridging figure across Afghanistan's multi-ethnic state. Furthermore, Sayyaf is close to the president and has previously served as a trusted intermediary on his behalf. He is rumored to have been involved in brokering a deal with the United States over the controversial presence of U.S. Special Forces in Wardak province in March and has been serving on the President's High Peace Council.⁷ The downside of encouraging a Sayyaf ticket, as one senior diplomat bluntly put it, is that such a choice would be considered "a disaster" and liable to jeopardize billions of dollars in foreign aid.⁸

In early June, Sayyaf began circulating a policy proposal suggesting that a core group of elected tribal elders, mujahideen commanders, politicians, civil society activists and religious scholars oversee the process of candidate selection and support. The key text of the proposal stated:

"The elected group [joint council] will try to prepare the ground to reach an agreement on introducing a single candidate who should be supported extensively and noticeably. If this team fails to accomplish this, those who insist on running in the election should contest it within the framework of this agreement. Necessary guarantees should be given to protect the prestige and security of those who have held official positions or made efforts to serve the people without holding any formal position. Freedom of speech should be introduced in the light of Islam and the Afghan Constitution. Women's rights should be specified within the Islamic Shar'iah law and their conditions should be improved."⁹

The ambiguity of the last line of the text has raised hackles about the prospect of a Sayyaf Presidency at a time when women's rights are already being visibly, and in some cases violently, eroded across the country. Conservative parliamentary opponents of women's rights have recently fought to repeal the Elimination of Violence

Against Women (EVAW) Act, which was signed into law by President Karzai and criminalizes, among other injustices, rape and forced marriage. In July, Islam Bibi, Afghanistan's senior-most policewoman for Helmand province, was shot and killed. In that same month, Afghanistan's Lower House of Parliament nearly repealed the 25% member quota for women on the country's 34 provincial councils. This past week, the Taliban abducted a female Minister of Parliament, Fariba Ahmadi Kakar, who represents Kandahar province.¹⁰ Equally troubling is that if, as has been rumored, Sayyaf chooses First Vice President Marshal Mohammad Fahim as one running mate and Hazara strongman Mohammad Mohaqqueq as the other, the upper echelons of the Afghan government would be entirely stacked with former Northern Alliance commanders, an outcome unlikely to appeal to the country's other Pashtun and Tajik opposition leaders.

While such a scenario cannot be discounted, there are a number of other plausible explanations for Karzai's keeping Sayyaf's candidacy on the boil. The President has proven himself to be a master manipulator, splintering his opposition by luring powerful warlords with promises of support and patronage. Allowing Sayyaf, and potentially other influential Tajik warlords who might ally with Sayyaf, like Fahim, to drift into an opposition camp would not be desirable from Karzai's perspective, regardless of who his preferred successor might be. Furthermore, Sayyaf's willingness to preside as patriarch of the country's national political consensus deflects attention away from the President and the perception that Karzai may be engaging in political engineering before an ostensibly democratic vote. Such a council, if it ever comes to fruition, could serve as a convenient vehicle for Karzai to promote his own choice behind-the-scenes, be it Sayyaf or his brother, Qayum Karzai, or any among a list of other likely candidates, ranging from Foreign Minister Zalmay Rasul to Ambassador to Pakistan Omar Daudzai.

Although it's unlikely given the tremendous amount of international pressure on the President to abide by the Afghan Constitution and to step down after a second term – to say nothing of Karzai's numerous affirmations to that effect – an inconclusive or bitter struggle among the potential contenders as part of a Sayyaf-orchestrated

consensus-building process could pave the way for another Loya Jirga or national referendum with the authority to amend the current constitution and extend Karzai's term of office. Powerbrokers across the south of the country, the locus of President Karzai's family stronghold, are already protesting and pleading for a delay in the elections and an extension of the President's term in office. Kandahar governor Toryalai Wesa has publicly affirmed his view that “the withdrawal of international forces is not the right time for new leadership.”¹¹ The prospect of changes to the Afghan Constitution could precipitate a host of other, more radical political scenarios, to include the installation of a Prime Minister as a counterweight to the President. Fahim expressed tentative support for such a change in a rare public speech given at the Afghan National Governors' Conference on June 11, but a close reading of the text reveals that his support largely stemmed from his desire to deflect criticism away from the Presidency, rather than from any lofty political or constitutional principles. Although a Putin-esque transition by Karzai to the Afghan Parliament would not be out of the realm of possibility, the President's longstanding aversion to political parties and his decade-long aggrandizement of power within the Executive Branch would seem to hinder, if not prevent, that prospect.

Fahim's concern with deflecting criticism touches upon another key line in Sayyaf's proposal. The notion of legal immunity for former officials, in particular the mujahideen, has been a political trope of Sayyaf's for years, but it is one that is likely to go over particularly well with the current administration as transition approaches. Martine van Bijlert of the Afghan Analysts Network aptly notes that the reasons these northern warlords consistently invoke the notion of “mujahideen solidarity” have as much to do with defending one another against potential legal and criminal retributions for past crimes as they are about securing political power, sinecures, and other forms of patronage. Most of these men with less-than-salubrious pasts, Sayyaf included, have good reason to be concerned.¹² Fahim echoed this fear in the same rambling speech he made to the Afghan Governors' Conference in mid-June:

“It is impossible with all the suffering and hardship that the mujahedin went through, that someone can just come in from the outside and do whatever he wants. We need unity, a real national consensus. It shouldn't be like this, that one day you are in power and the next day someone comes after you. It happens all the time, even in this age of democracy. If we do that, the war will start again.”¹³

So, too, does Karzai have reason to be anxious, as his own brother, Mahmoud Karzai, was implicated in the wildly controversial Kabul Bank scandal, littered among other allegations of Karzai family corruption, fraud, and narcotics trafficking.¹⁴

The Wall Street Journal reporter Yaroslav Trofimov commented in the aftermath of the episode that “the fact that he [Sayyaf] is considered by Mr. Karzai and other Afghan politicians highlights the degree to which Western influence has declined in Kabul ahead of the U.S. troop withdrawal next year.”¹⁵ After President Karzai's bitter tussles with the United States over the Bilateral Security Agreement, the staging and location of the Taliban's Doha Office, and mounting civilian casualties, that may, after all is said and done, be precisely the sentiment the president wants at this moment to convey.

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NOTES

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³ Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2009), 45. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), 82-83.

⁴ Jon Lee Anderson, “The Assassins,” *The New Yorker*, June 10 2002.

⁵ Yaroslav Trofimov, “Karzai's Successor Pick Has Links to Bin Laden,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 August 2013.

⁶ “Influential Afghan Jihadi Leaders Oppose Reconciliation with Insurgents,” *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, 11 September 2011.

⁷ Kevin Sieff, “In Afghanistan, Karzai Is on a High-Stakes Quest for Sovereignty,” *The Washington Post*, 17 March 2013.

⁸ Trofimov, “Karzai's Successor Pick Has Links to Bin Laden.”

⁹ “Former Jihadi Leader Presents Proposal for Next Election,” (Afghan Channel One TV, 2013).

¹⁰ Heather Barr, “The Long Arc of Justice in Afghanistan,” *The Af-Pak Channel* (2013), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/09/womens_rights_in_afghanistan_a_lost_cause.

¹¹ Kevin Sieff, “Karzai Backers Seek Delay in Afghan Vote,” *The Washington Post*, July 31, 2013.

¹² Human Rights Watch, “Killing You Is a Very Easy Thing for Us': Human Rights Abuses in Southeast Afghanistan,” (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

¹³ Martine van Bijlert, “Getting Ready for Change. Or: What to Make of Fahim's Speech,” *Afghan Analysts Network* (2013).

¹⁴ Carl Forsberg, “The Karzai-Fahim Alliance,” (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012).

¹⁵ Trofimov, “Karzai's Successor Pick Has Links to Bin Laden.”