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US to Karzai on Afghan election: congratulations, now shape up

Western leaders sent messages of support to Hamid Karzai after his opponent dropped out of the election in Afghanistan. But the US is also exploring alternatives, including a closer association with local leaders.

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WASHINGTON

The Obama administration on Monday embraced the second term of Afghan President Hamid Karzai – a leader whom the US under President Obama had until recently dismissed as too corrupt to serve as a partner for the international effort in Afghanistan.

But the US acceptance of Mr. Karzai does not suggest any change in official perceptions of the Afghan leader or in his capacity to govern his divided and war-ravaged country, regional experts say. Rather, the new tone is an acceptance of the inevitable extension of the Karzai presidency, they say, even as the United States explores other alternatives, including a closer association with local Afghan leaders.

"It's all been so mishandled, the elections and the leadership issues, but now that they [in the administration] are confronted with the reality of another Karzai term, they will try to paper over everything and make this guy look like a legitimate and worthy leader for us to work with," says Selig Harrison, director of the Asia program at the Center for International Policy (CIP) in Washington.

On Monday, the Kabul government's Independent Election Commission called off a presidential runoff scheduled for Nov. 7 and declared Karzai the victor, after Karzai's opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, withdrew Sunday. Mr. Abdullah cited his doubts that a second vote would be any fairer or cleaner than the first round in August.

Western leaders congratulated Karzai on his reelection. The US Embassy in Kabul declared, "We congratulate President Karzai on his victory in this historic election and look forward to working with him" – specifically, the statement said, on needed government reforms and more public security.

But settling Afghanistan's electoral uncertainties doesn't resolve the doubts about Karzai's validity, regional analysts say. "This 'election' of Karzai does little if anything to raise the legitimacy of his government, because the underlying problems of rampant corruption and illegitimacy in the eyes of so many Afghans are still there," says Malou Innocent, an expert in Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Cato Institute in Washington. "It's just a superficial fix that does nothing to address the problems plaguing the entire political system."

US officials and other Western leaders say they will now watch closely as Karzai names his cabinet – in particular looking for indications that Karzai has gotten the message about the need for qualified and clean ministers and for a cabinet promoting national unity.

At the same time, however, the White House is indicating that Mr. Obama may look to circumvent the national government by stepping up relations with provincial governors and tribal leaders. Last week, officials say, Obama requested a rundown of Afghanistan's provinces, including which have the most reliable leaders capable of working with the US and the international community on providing security and basic services to local populations.

More of a bottom-up approach to Afghanistan gets points from experts who say that a heavy focus on the centralized leadership of a historically decentralized country has been one of Washington's – and the West's – biggest mistakes.

"A localized approach would be a step in the right direction, if only because it would better recognize Afghanistan for what it is – a very divided and decentralized country," Ms. Innocent says. "But it's not going to solve the pervasive problems like a lack of local justice systems that are pushing the local populations into the arms of the Taliban."

Afghanistan needs a political system that is suited to its traditions and history, says Mr. Harrison of CIP,, but he sees little chance of either a new Karzai government or outsiders delivering that. "It's not something we're going to fashion through a province-by-province review," he says.

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