

**Afghanistan's Karzai considers early presidential polls**  
**Reuters**  
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KABUL, April 12 — Afghan President Hamid Karzai said today he is considering calling presidential elections a year early in 2013 to avoid overlapping with the drawdown of US-led NATO forces due to be completed by the end of 2014.

But it was unclear how serious the proposal was since Karzai, whose second five-year term ends in May 2014, does not have the constitutional authority to call elections early.

He also suggested an alternative would be for foreign forces to leave earlier - a comment he has made in the past in frustration over a string of incidents involving US forces this year, including the killing of Afghan villagers and the accidental burning of copies of the Koran.

"Can we bring either the transition and the return of international forces to 2013...or should we allow the transition process to complete itself in 2014, but bring the presidential election one year earlier to 2013," Karzai said.

"This is a question that I have had, and I have raised it with my inner circle, if we cannot have all that accomplished in 2014 because of the heavy agenda," he told a news conference in Kabul with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

Under the constitution, a vote must be held before the end of 2014 to elect a successor to Karzai.

Karzai would have to get approval from two-thirds of MPs in Afghanistan's fractious parliament to change the date of the vote, which would then require approval from a meeting of tribal elders, known as a loya jirga, analysts said.

"It is not in President Karzai's authority to change the election date," said Wadeer Safi, a law faculty professor at Kabul University. "If a Loya Jirga approves it then they can change the date, otherwise it's illegal."

Karzai said he had been discussing the idea for months with aides, but no decision had been taken or was even close.

#### Providing security for polls

With most foreign combat troops due to be out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014 after gradually handing over to Afghan forces, it could be difficult to provide security for a 2014 presidential poll.

As it is, there is little sign of improving security in Afghanistan. Insurgents are already mounting a spring campaign of suicide attacks, while talks with the Taliban as part of efforts to reach a political settlement appear to have stalled.

Rasmussen said he was confident the full transition to Afghan soldiers and police would be

completed as planned by the end of 2014 but promised foreign countries would still be ready to provide advice and support to Afghanistan after that.

"We will not abandon Afghanistan after 2014. We will stay and assist. NATO is here as Afghanistan's partner," Rasmussen said in a message on Twitter after meeting Karzai.

The US military is considering plans to leave special forces in the country to give support and advice to Afghan security forces through the transition process to help combat any insurgent surge as NATO forces withdraw.

US and Afghan officials have been trying to negotiate an accord for a long-term US presence in Afghanistan beyond the 2014 deadline to allow advisers and possibly some special forces to stay on.

The United States and its partners have also to agree how much different countries will pay to provide financial support to Afghanistan and fund its security forces after 2014.

NATO nations have been planning to build the Afghan police and army to a force of about 352,000 and then scaling them back as — they hope — the insurgent threat fades and as financial support shrinks from the West.

Karzai said Afghanistan would not consider reducing the number of security forces until at least 2015 or 2016 and that would depend on the security situation, and the training and readiness of Afghan forces. — Reuters

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