

Afghan President Issues Reforms Aimed at Corruption
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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Afghan president released a sweeping set of proposed reforms late Thursday, including a number aimed at stemming the government's endemic corruption; the proposals touched every ministry, the attorney general's office and the Supreme Court.

The document, which the president's spokesman Aimal Faizi described in a Twitter message as a "decree on administrative reforms," is similar to an executive order and in theory must be complied with by all organs of government. However, Parliament can review it, and many of the provisions are vague, leaving unclear the timetable for compliance and how some of the measures would be financed.

One backdrop for the decree was the discontent of donor countries over the government's failure to stem widespread corruption, nepotism and contract profiteering. At an international conference in Tokyo this month about funding for Afghanistan in the years to come, many countries said their continued financial support was contingent on progress on corruption.

"The first intent is to satisfy donors' demands, which are multiple and not fully reflected in the Tokyo Conference document," said Candace Rondeaux, the head of the Kabul office of the International Crisis Group, an independent nongovernmental organization aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts.

Different countries have long had varying levels of tolerance for corruption, and they have different laws governing foreign aid. Afghanistan's Supreme Court, judiciary and attorney general's office have been areas of concern for many donors here.

The 23-page list of provisions included a grab bag of policies. Some appeared to be serious gestures aimed at reducing nepotism and corruption, like ones ordering senior government officials to "avoid intervening in the recruitment for the civil service, judiciary and universities," while others were more symbolic exhortations, including a call for the Women's Ministry to undertake a public relations campaign about violence against women.

One of the more pointed corruption-related provisions called on the Supreme Court to complete all open investigations related to corruption, land grabs and serial assassinations within the next six months.

Given the breadth of the document, it seems that it has many purposes, depending on the provision. But one possible motivation is for the president, Hamid Karzai, to have a forum for presenting himself as taking a strong stand against corruption. He has long been in a difficult position because a number of his close allies in the government feel entitled to pressure ministries into giving jobs to their relatives and take kickbacks on contracts. Further, Mr. Karzai's own relatives have been tarnished by corruption fiascos, including the huge Kabul Bank fraud scandal.

In the past, his approach has been to create commissions and offices with investigative power. This time his tone suggests he is issuing an order for action, but as in the past, the enforcement mechanism is vague.

Some of the provisions raise serious questions about their intent, like one directed toward the Supreme Court ordering it to “simplify the legal procedures for suspects and convicts within the given timetable.” It is unclear if Mr. Karzai is trying to clear the way for more detainees to be released — many people are held in Afghan jails for long periods without trial — or whether some other end was intended.

Habib Zahori contributed reporting.

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