

# Pen pictures of candidates in Afghan election

Following are brief profiles of the leading candidates standing in the Afghan presidential elections on October 9: Hamid Karzai current head of the transitional government and the favourite to win the election, Karzai is the darling of the West. A Pashtun from southern Kandahar, he has struggled at times to maintain a grip over some of the ethnic warlords from the north and west but at 46 is seen by many Afghans and outsiders as the best hope for the country's future.

Yunus Qanuni, an ethnic Tajik, Qanuni was senior Northern Alliance leader and interior minister in Karzai's government. Relations cooled when Karzai demoted him to education minister in 2002. He resigned after announcing his candidature. He decided to stand after Karzai unexpectedly dropped Mohammad Qasim Fahim, the powerful defence minister and first vice president, as running mate. Qanuni has the backing of both Fahim and Foreign Minister Dr Abdullah, both fellow Tajiks.

Fahim is opposed to Karzai's US-backed policies, including the drive to disarm factions that provided the Northern Alliance's military muscle. Abdul Rashid Dostum, a powerful ethnic Uzbek commander with a stronghold in northern parts of country, General Dostum has a history of shifting allegiances depending on what might suit him and his supporters. Although not considered a direct threat to Karzai, analysts say the unpredictable general is seeking political leverage by entering the contest. If he withdrew, he could provide crucial support to other candidates.

Abdul Latif Pedram, a former journalist and member of the Northern Alliance who has spent years exiled in Paris, Pedram is a professor of oriental studies and a published poet. An ethnic Tajik, he has no power base. Hamayon Shah Asifi, a cousin of ailing ex-king Zahir Shah and a royalist, Asifi has campaigned to get Karzai to relinquish his position as head of the transitional government ahead of the polls, accusing him of using state resources to plan and run his campaign.

Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, another rank outsider, draws support from ethnic Shia Muslim Hazara clansmen of central Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of them are living as refugees in Iran but eligible to

vote. He served as deputy to Karzai and also planning minister before losing office. Sayed Ishaq Gailani, from one of Afghanistan's most influential religious families, remains a strong supporter of the monarchy and a greater role for Zahir Shah.

He is considered a moderate, but Gailani has been a strong critic of Karzai and US involvement in Afghanistan. He could dilute the Pashtun vote. Abdul Satar Serat, a veteran politician who has spent most of the past 25 years abroad, he is seen as the most intellectual candidate. He was widely tipped to become the head of the interim government after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, but, thanks to US support, Karzai was chosen at an international conference in Bonn that framed Afghanistan's post-Taliban future.

An Uzbek and a former justice minister, Serat has long been associated with the king and efforts to restore the monarchy. Massouda Jalal, the only woman candidate, is a qualified paediatrician from northern Afghanistan. Likely to be the subject of much media attention and curiosity, but few expect her to make a serious challenge. Syed Abdul Hadi Dabir is a member of one of mujahideen factions and a critic of Karzai. He opposes the presence of US-led forces in Afghanistan, but supports the presence of the international peacekeeping force. Abdul Hafiz Mansoor a traditionalist, angered many - and pleased a few too - by ordering a ban on women singing on air while he was head of Kabul TV and Radio after brief stint as Karzai's information minister.

Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai, former prime minister Ahmadzai, is expected to take some of the Pashtun vote from Karzai, notably by winning support from those opposed to continuing US-led intervention. A qualified engineer, Ahmadzai is strongly religious. Mir Mohammad Mahfouz Nedaye, a leftist academic who originally served as a member of Karzai's government, but was later sacked. The following are also running, but observers suggest many will withdraw before the vote and form alliances with stronger candidates: Ghulam Farooq Nijrabi, Abdul Hadi Khalilzai, Abdul Hasseb Aryan, Wakil Mangal and Mohammad Ebrahim Rashid.

(Courtesy Kuwait Times)