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Mr. Karzai Relents, Editorial

Before Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, announced to run for reelection on Tuesday, you could almost hear his arm being twisted. And it took a lot of top-level talent to do it. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain and the French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, all insisted that Mr. Karzai accept an international audit that would have nearly one-third of his first-round votes wrested from him. Even then it took a five-day marathon of negotiations with Senator John Kerry, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, to get Mr. Karzai to do what was necessary. And that was the easy part. To ensure that the run-off is fair and credible, it's going to take a lot more effort and high-level attention, and even more arm-twisting. And there are less than three weeks before the Nov. 7 vote. A fair election is essential. But if Mr. Karzai wins, the odds are he will turn him into the credible leader that the Afghan people deserve and the credible partner that the United States needs if there is any hope of holding off the Taliban. Mr. Karzai's main challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, talks a better game but is untested. The next Afghan government has no hope at all unless it is truly committed to rooting out corruption (Mr. Karzai will have to start with his own brother, who, American officials charge, is deeply involved in the drug trade) and delivering basic services and security to its people. President Obama may still be undecided about future United States troop levels, but he should be delivering this message to Afghanistan's leaders and the American military and diplomats right now. When asked why Mr. Karzai thought he could get away with stealing the election, American officials blame the Bush administration, and, in particular, President George W. Bush, who enabled Mr. Karzai's worst impulses while refusing to invest the troops, money or attention that Afghanistan desperately needed. That is all true. And the election planning was well along before President Obama took office. But he and his aides should have taken a lot more care to ensure that Mr. Karzai and his challengers understood that such wholesale fraud would be a disaster in Afghanistan and in the United States, where support for the war is fast evaporating. (Likewise, we wonder what happened to Mr. Obama's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who established a bureaucratic fiefdom at the State Department but has been neither seen nor heard from during this critical period.) The run-off won't be easy to pull off. Time is short, winter is near and the Taliban threat continues to worsen. The Afghan government must immediately dismiss any election officials implicated in the fraud. The United Nations, which sponsored the independent audit, will have to play a more robust role in overseeing the preparations for the vote, monitoring polls and the count. The United States and NATO must get ready to provide security for voters and monitors. To have any chance of producing a legitimate result, both candidates must make clear that, this time, they are not encouraging and will not tolerate ballot-box stuffing and phantom voting. While Mr. Karzai's supporters accounted for nearly a million tainted ballots, some 200,000 votes cast for Mr. Abdullah were also thrown out. Meanwhile, there is talk of a possible political deal between Mr. Karzai and Mr. Abdullah that might obviate the new election. That should not be anyone's first choice. If it is unavoidable, it must be done constitutionally, and it must produce a functional government that is committed to a responsible agenda. We have watched as American officials debate military strategy for Afghanistan. They need to devote at least as much attention to coming up with an effective political strategy. The lesson of the stolen election is clear: Nothing in Afghanistan can be taken for granted.

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