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The Long Road to Becoming Afghanistan's Next Ambassador

by Lee Berthiaume

On Sept. 22, 2006, Afghan President Hamid Karzai delivered a speech to a joint session of Parliament in which he outlined the reasons for Canada to support his country, and thanked the Canadians for their sacrifices.

"I stand before you today with deep emotions," Mr. Karzai told the nation. "It is a pleasure to be among friends in Canada today, and to be visiting a great nation that is a model to the rest of us for all that is good."

The address received a standing ovation from parliamentarians and senators and was considered a high-water mark in relations between the two countries.

Then in September 2007, NDP defence critic Dawn Black unveiled government documents that she said proved the Canadian government had, in fact, effectively written Mr. Karzai's speech as part of an "elaborately staged political stunt."

The accusations prompted rebukes from several Afghan officials, not least Jawed Ludin, the president's chief of staff in 2006 and the man who actually penned Mr. Karzai's address, who described the charges as "baseless" and "deeply offensive."

Nearly two years later, Mr. Ludin is preparing to take over as Afghanistan's next envoy to Canada. However, while he maintains his disappointment with the charges, the new ambassador insists he's ready to work with all political parties in his new position.

"I know they didn't make this statement to harm President Karzai or myself," Mr. Ludin said in an interview from Oslo yesterday. "They probably genuinely believed that that was the case."

"But now when I'm coming to Canada, I'm coming with absolutely deeply held respect to every Canadian, to every official, to every parliamentarian, to every political party."

Mr. Ludin expects to arrive in Ottawa in mid-June to take over from Omar Samad, who will be leaving to take over the Afghan Embassy in Paris after five years in Canada.

Mr. Ludin has travelled a long road to get to Ottawa. Born in Kabul in 1973, he lived and was educated in the Afghan capital through the country's short-lived presidency in the 1970s, the Soviet occupation of the 1980s and the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal.

In 1992, Mr. Ludin was attending medical school at the University of Kabul when anti-Soviet forces entered the capital and the institution was shut down, forcing him to stop his studies.

From April to August 1992, "we practically lived in a bunker because we were in a battle zone, we were caught between warring groups," Mr. Ludin recalls. "The area got bombed and shelled from both sides. It was absolutely like hell. So we

had to get out."

The family fled to Pakistan, settling in Peshawar where Mr. Ludin started working in 1994 for a number of NGOs delivering humanitarian assistance. Through his work, he also managed to travel to Europe and North America.

In 1998, Mr. Ludin received death threats for doing what he described as "political work."

"We didn't see it as such, but to the outsiders it might well have been political because we were working for peace and human rights," he said.

Mr. Ludin fled to London where he studied politics and sociology, earning a master's in political science. Mr. Ludin says he was not really politically engaged. Rather, he continued his work with NGOs, including one doing work on Afghanistan.

It was during this time that terrorists attacked New York City and Washington, D.C., and the United States launched a war against Al-Qaeda and Afghanistan's Taliban rulers.

Mr. Ludin's first exposure to post-9/11 Afghan politics came with the Bonn Conference that November when he was asked to help organize the meeting. While he met a number of politicians and influential Afghans, such as former finance minister Ashraf Ghani, Mr. Ludin returned to London to continue working. Six months later, the government changed and a number of people from civil society who Mr. Ludin had worked with got involved in government, including a number of ministers. Those connections, he said, remain.

"Some of those people who I worked with in those years, lots of them are now in the government," he said. "So we do sort of belong to a small group of people...working for mainly the NGOs at that time."

Mr. Karzai's chief of staff at the time introduced Mr. Ludin to the Afghan president in 2003, who appointed the 30-year-old as his director of communications, which cemented his return to Afghanistan and threw him into the country's political scene. Two years later, he was named Mr. Karzai's chief of staff.

"A lot of us knew that we would be called upon to do things we would never have expected," he said. "I was young, I had commitment, and I had this deep belief that this was an opportunity that will probably never come again if we missed it...it was a total sense of dedication, and it wasn't just me."

At the same time, Mr. Ludin says, Afghanistan had never really had a real presidency in its history, and he had "very specific ideas on how the presidency could be improved as an institution." One of those was to make the chief of staff a gatekeeper.

"Essentially I wanted the presidency to be a filter, to filter things before they got to the president," Mr. Ludin said. "There were too many people who had access to him...this was simply taking a big toll on his time and his energy."

Mr. Ludin says what he hadn't counted on was the political backlash that would result from people having their links to Mr. Karzai cut, "because access to the president is a very, very highly political privilege." At the same time, he acknowledges his age worked against him.

He admits the fallout was partly to blame for his resignation in January 2007. While he doesn't say it, the move was clearly a disappointment.

"At the end of two years I'd come to the realization that the one thing one has to learn in management is that one should never get into the trap of thinking that one is indispensable," Mr. Ludin said, though he is proud of the groundwork he did to lay down a solid foundation for a functioning presidency.

In May 2007, Mr. Ludin was accredited as Afghanistan's ambassador to Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. He says in this position he has helped those countries increase their civilian contributions to Afghanistan.

Mr. Ludin says he is prepared for what will undoubtedly be a stressful posting in Ottawa. Canada will likely begin

debating its role in Afghanistan beyond 2011 next year, with popular opinion overwhelmingly against continued involvement, at least militarily. At the same time, questions have been raised about the state of democracy, corruption and human rights in the country.

The incoming ambassador says he has some knowledge of the Afghan debate in Canada—he has two daughters in Montreal he visits from time to time—and he is ready to play his part.

"I come without any pre-set goals," he said. "But one goal that I have is to be able to, as much as possible and as appropriate, to contribute to that debate."

Previously, Mr. Ludin has called for a continued military presence in Afghanistan, arguing that humanitarian efforts alone will not work.

When asked about these comments, Mr. Ludin said: "We cannot defeat the Taliban without military engagement. That's why there is an international military engagement in Afghanistan."

However, he refrained from making any specific comments about Canada's involvement in post-2011, saying the specific nature and role of Canada's mission "will be up to the Canadians."

"I think there are a number of very important ways in which Canada's contribution can continue," he added. "We would be grateful to see the continuation of a Canadian presence."

Mr. Ludin said the bottomline is Afghanistan must be prepared to defend itself.

"It's actually, essentially, primarily our conflict, our situation, our fight to fight, our war to fight. So in that sense we are absolutely eager that we are able to take responsibility as soon as possible."

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