

2
 ARTICLE APPEARED
 ON PAGE 1 (Part I).

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Afghanistan's Leader Quits as Party Chief

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NEW DELHI—Afghan President Babrak Karmal resigned as head of the Afghan Communist Party on Sunday amid reports that he had fallen out of favor with the Soviet Union.

In a broadcast from Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, the government radio said Karmal has been replaced as party general secretary by the Afghan security chief, identified by the single name of Najibullah. Karmal will remain as president and also as chairman of the ruling Revolutionary Council, a Kabul radio broadcast said.

Karmal, 57, has reportedly been suffering from poor health, and the broadcast said he was replaced at his own request because of health reasons.

Rumors of his fall from grace began circulating when he failed to attend an April 27 parade marking the eighth anniversary of the Communist takeover of Afghanistan, in 1978. The parade is considered the country's most important political event, and Karmal's failure to appear prompted speculation that he was very ill or would soon be ousted.

His replacement as party leader is expected to have little effect on the policy of the government, since both Karmal and Najibullah, 39, are members of the same Parcham (Flag) faction of the party, formally known as the People's Democratic Party.

Afghanistan has been described as a country of "two-party communism" and there have been bitter, often violent, rivalries between two factions—Parcham and the rival Khalq (Masses).

U.S. reaction to the leadership change was terse. "We will not attach undue importance to the changeover in leadership in Kabul," State Department spokeswoman Anita Stockman said in Washington.

"The identities of those who hold leadership positions are of less significance than the continued presence of 120,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan."

Beyond Afghan government policy, the elevation of Najibullah to the top party post may have significance in Afghanistan's important tribal political arena, possibly as a move aimed at winning key support of the Pushtun people for the Soviet-installed regime.

In the Afghan tribal scheme, Najibullah is a member of the large Pushtun tribe in Paktia province. An estimated 55% (8 million) of Afghanistan's people is Pushtun. Even more important, most Pushtuns live in the border areas where the bulk of fighting is taking place between Soviet-supported Afghan troops and U.S.-supported rebels, known as *moujahedeen*.

Karmal was installed in power as the result of the Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979, which replaced a second, failed Marxist government—that of Hafizullah Amin, who was executed. Karmal, although sometimes claiming Pushtun ethnic ties, is generally viewed in Afghanistan as a member of the Dari-speaking urban elite, as are most of the members of his Parcham faction of the party.

Until last year, Najibullah, who was trained as a medical doctor, served as head of the Afghan secret police. His title until Sunday has been Central Committee secretary in charge of security. He holds the rank of major general.

According to Anthony Arnold, a former U.S. intelligence officer in Kabul who has written a book on Afghan party politics, Najibullah has been a consistent ally of Karmal.

Pushtun nationalism has long been an important political factor on both sides of the border, and Najibullah is considered an impor-

tant factor in the Kabul regime's efforts to win over Pushtun border tribes to its side.

He is reported to have turned the secret police into an effective force to infiltrate rebel ranks and persuade or bribe border tribes to block rebels coming in from Pakistan.

The Kabul government army, which according to Western diplomats has dwindled from its pre-1978 level of 80,000 to about 30,000, has failed to achieve a decisive turn in the war against the rebels.

Criticism in Pravda

The day before the April 27 parade commemorating the revolution, the Soviet Communist Party newspaper Pravda criticized the pace of reforms in Afghanistan under Karmal.

Karmal, meanwhile, had dropped from sight after going to the Soviet Union a month ago, ostensibly for medical treatment. Western diplomats report that he may be suffering from leukemia. He finally returned to Kabul last Thursday and was greeted by most senior government officials and the Soviet ambassador.

Because the latest round of United Nations-sponsored peace talks on Afghanistan are scheduled to begin today in Geneva, no major changes in the Afghan government had been expected.

However, when rumors of Karmal's departure were at their height, a Western diplomat commented from Islamabad, the Pakistani capital:

"Remember that the Pakistan government has always said that it will not negotiate directly with the 'Karmal government' in Kabul. Presumably, then, if the Afghans changed their leadership and it became someone else's government, the Pakistanis might be prepared to talk."