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An Uphill Road for Afghanistan's Money Man

By DAVID ROHDE
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Ashraf Ghani is Afghanistan's money man, and money, obviously, brings with it power. Earlier in June, Mr. Ghani, a former professor at an American college, capped a stunning rise to power by being sworn in as finance minister of Afghanistan's new transitional government, six months after leaving his home in Bethesda, Md. Over the next 18 months, he will oversee the distribution of billions of dollars in aid money and wield enormous influence as a senior government minister and close confidant of Afghanistan's leader, Hamid Karzai.

But with the United States and other donor nations having delivered only \$1 billion of the \$1.7 billion in immediate aid they pledged for Afghanistan in January, Mr. Ghani and his fellow ministers are in a vulnerable position. The vast majority of the aid has gone to the United Nations and foreign groups, leaving the fledgling government with a \$100 million deficit and thousands of unpaid and angry teachers and civil servants.

Mr. Ghani, Mr. Karzai and other returning exiles who play such a prominent role in the new government must also somehow meet the mammoth expectations of the Afghan people while not being perceived as American puppets. Mr. Ghani exemplifies a growing schism in the country: the rise of Western-educated, pro-American technocrats in the central government while warlords and religious conservatives dominate the rest of the country.

Mr. Karzai himself spent years in the United States. Taj Muhammad Wardak, the newly appointed interior minister, returned to Afghanistan last fall from California.

Mr. Ghani, 53, at first glance seems as American as he is Afghan. He dresses in silk ties and dark business suits. He speaks fluent English and enunciates with an academic's soft and careful manner.

"What the international community needs to understand is that we want to use the present as a bridge to the future," he said in an interview in Kabul in May, "and not be condemned for the past."

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To many American and European officials, Mr. Ghani is ideal for the new government. After earning a doctorate in anthropology at Columbia in 1982, Mr. Ghani taught at Johns Hopkins University. In 1991, he joined the World Bank.

That posting gave him contacts and credibility with Western donor nations. Sensitive to their concerns, he has vowed to crack down on corruption in Afghanistan.

Before being named finance minister, Mr. Ghani headed the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority, a newly created government office that approved all major aid projects in Afghanistan.

"He has made himself the indispensable broker inside and outside the government," said Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations' special representative to Afghanistan and a friend of Mr. Ghani's.

But after 24 years in exile, he has spent almost as many years in the United States as he has in Afghanistan, which could hurt his credibility with some Afghans. Also, some Western diplomats said they feared his brusque manner could alienate Afghans and foreign aid officials.

His dedication has not been questioned, though. He is a tireless worker, and he constantly tries to counter his country's image as a bereft place. A bulleted item from his "talking points" for the interview read: "failed politics, but not failed state." And he described Afghans as "an incredibly politically conscious public" that compensates for a 70 percent illiteracy rate by constantly listening to radio news from the outside world.

Mr. Ghani, an ethnic Pashtun born near Kabul, made an emotional return to Afghanistan last December, as an adviser to the United Nations mission. He said he was "devastated by the scale of the destruction."

He soon met Mr. Karzai, with whom he had previously spoken only by telephone, and agreed to become his adviser. He resigned from the World Bank, moved out of his Bethesda home, and arrived in Kabul with his wife and 20-year-old son, Tarek, who is on leave from his studies at Stanford University and works as his special assistant. Mr. Ghani's daughter stayed behind and opened a nonprofit art collective in New York.

As finance minister, Mr. Ghani faces many challenges. There are early signs of donor fatigue, with the World Food Program still lacking enough contributions to deliver food in some parts of the country. And officials in Washington have questioned why there have not been more road building and other projects that would immediately create jobs for some of the country's tens of thousands of armed former combatants.

The arrival of a large United Nations mission and scores of aid groups in Kabul has distorted the local economy, causing rents and pay rates to skyrocket. Many of the most talented Afghans are taking better-paying jobs with foreign aid groups instead of working for the talent-starved government.

A program that Mr. Ghani started to eradicate opium crops sparked violent protests in areas outside Kabul. The effort seemed to highlight the divisions between Kabul and the rest of the country. But Mr. Ghani insists those gaps are not as wide as they appear.

"I thought I would find a people that would be nationalists and would have a narrow, nationalist focus," he said. "What I've discovered is that people are clear that the path to security and stabilization is through the international community."