

Fall of Kabul sets stage for further political conflict in Afghanistan

Peter Symonds

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The rapid disintegration of the Taliban hold over much of Afghanistan, including the fall of the capital Kabul on Tuesday to the US-backed opposition forces of the Northern Alliance, has left the US and its allies scrambling to cobble together a regime to fill the political vacuum.

The collapse began last Friday when the Northern Alliance captured the key northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and rapidly extended its control to Herat in the west and Taloqan in the north. In the space of a few days, the anti-Taliban opposition had expanded its territory from 10 percent of the country to nearly half. In the north, only pockets of Taliban resistance remain, most notably its stronghold at Kunduz.

Many of the Northern Alliance gains were made without any serious fighting. US bombers have been pounding the Taliban frontlines for weeks in coordination with US special forces and military advisers who have been helping Northern Alliance generals plan their campaign. A key element in the Taliban collapse appears to have been the defection of significant number of troops and commanders, including such figures as the governor of Bamyan province.

But as the Northern Alliance prepared to move towards Kabul, President Bush reiterated previous US injunctions not to take the capital. He declared over the weekend: "We will encourage our friends to head south but not into the city of Kabul itself." Bush was speaking after meeting with Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, who has adamantly opposed an Afghan government dominated by the Northern Alliance.

Dependent on US air support, advisers and, in all probability, arms and finance, the Northern Alliance leaders had pledged to halt at the gates to the capital to allow time for US and UN diplomatic negotiations with other potential parties to a new administration. Early on Tuesday morning, however, the Taliban suddenly retreated from Kabul toward its southern stronghold of Kandahar, and Northern Alliance troops quickly moved into the capital.

The latest news indicates further Taliban reversals in southern Afghanistan where the US CIA has been actively working to foment opposition among Pashtun tribal groups.

The city of Jalalabad has reportedly fallen to an anti-Taliban group, and a Northern Alliance spokesman has claimed that its forces, operating with local Pashtun rebels, have entered Kandahar. The full extent of the Taliban losses remain uncertain but it appears to control as little as 20 percent of the country.

The character of the Northern Alliance has been in full evidence with a string of summary executions of Taliban fighters by its troops—in some cases in full view of Western photographers and journalists. UN spokeswoman Stephanie Bunker confirmed that the Northern Alliance had massacred more than 100 Taliban fighters—for the most part young, unseasoned recruits—in Mazar-e-Sharif after they were caught hiding in a school building. Numerous incidents of looting have also been reported.

While the US administration is now tentatively congratulating itself for having engineered the implosion of the Taliban regime, the Northern Alliance advances have set the stage for a new round of political conflict as the various Afghan factions fight over the spoils. The Northern Alliance itself is a disparate coalition of local warlords and ethnic-based militia, which, over the last decade, have repeatedly switched sides and fought each other. The main cement holding the alliance together is the hostility felt by each of the factions and their main foreign backers—Russia, Iran and India—toward the Taliban.

Having seized Kabul, the Northern Alliance is now cautiously attempting to dictate the terms on which a new government will be formed. It has announced an interim administration, taken over key ministries and called for the convening of a meeting of Afghan factions in Kabul to decide the political future of the country. However, the US and Britain operating in league with the UN and its special envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, are determined to put their own stamp on any Afghan regime.

While co-operating closely with its troops, the Bush administration has raised concerns about an administration in Kabul dominated by the Northern Alliance. Washington has pointed to the danger that the Northern Alliance, which

is drawn largely drawn from the minority ethnic groups in the north, would exclude representatives of the country's Pashtun majority in the south. Guarded references have also been made to the bloody record of the Northern Alliance factions, which fought each other for control of Kabul between 1992 and 1996, levelling much of the capital and killing an estimated 50,000 people.

The real concerns, however, are not over the ethnic mix of any new Afghani administration, nor the past atrocities carried out by various factions and militia. The main issue at stake is who will wield political control in Afghanistan and influence over the neighbouring resource-rich region of Central Asia. Having launched the war against Afghanistan, Washington is not about to relinquish control over the outcome to particular Afghani factions—and thereby to their foreign backers.

Most of the Afghani factions trace their origins to the Mujaheddin groups financed and armed by the US in the 1980s to fight against the Soviet-backed regime. Following that regime's collapse in 1992, the conflict continued as the neighbouring states vied for influence in Afghanistan by backing various proxies. The diplomatic wrangling currently underway is thus a complex political equation involving each of these groups and their various foreign supporters.

Pakistan, under pressure from the US, was compelled to end its support for the Taliban and has been desperately seeking to recover its position by calling for the inclusion of "moderate Taliban" and other Pashtun leaders with whom it has ties, in any new administration. The Northern Alliance sponsors—Russia, Iran and India—have all publicly opposed the inclusion of any former Taliban leaders.

These matters are currently being thrashed out in the United Nations in what is known as the "Six plus Two" group on Afghanistan—the US and Russia along with the six neighbouring countries, China, Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Everyone agrees with the general formula of a "broadly-based, multi-ethnic, representative" government but who exactly will be represented, to what degree and who will preside over the process are all subject to sharp contention.

The US is pushing the diplomatic events as rapidly as possible. As one diplomat noted after a meeting of the "Six plus Two" group, US Secretary of State Colin Powell emphasised the necessity for "speed, speed, speed". The major thrust of the US proposals is to prevent the Northern Alliance from consolidating a de facto administration in Kabul. Powell has called for Kabul to be converted into an "open city" under the control of a UN force led by troops from Muslim countries, including Turkey, Indonesia and Bangladesh. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has urged the UN to establish a presence in Kabul "as soon as possible"

and has placed several thousand British troops on standby.

A frenzy of diplomatic activity is underway. US special envoy to the Afghan opposition James Dobbins has been dispatched to London, Rome, Ankara, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Islamabad for urgent talks over the make-up of a new administration. In Rome, he met with Afghanistan's exiled king, the 87-year-old Zahir Shah, to discuss his role in any future political arrangements. Dobbins is due to finish his trip in the Pakistani city of Peshawar for discussions with various Afghani exile leaders.

UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, who has called for a meeting of Afghani leaders to discuss the establishment of a two-year transitional government, is also about to leave for Pakistan for talks. In outlining his plan to the UN, he was at pains to say that the UN was not about to "parachute in" officials to set up a protectorate, as in East Timor or Kosovo, but would invite Afghans to take the lead.

But for all the attempts to dress up the US and UN proposals for a "broadly-based" and "representative" government in Afghanistan, the various plans are a transparent exercise in installing another colonial-type administration at the beck and call of the major powers. Whatever disagreements and conflicts emerge between the major powers, the regional states and the various Afghani factions, the political formula being discussed does not include the democratic involvement of the people of Afghanistan.



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