

# Murder of an Afghan minister reveals a weak, divided government

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The killing of Afghanistan's Tourism and Aviation Minister Abdul Rahman at Kabul airport last Thursday evening has highlighted the fractious and unstable character of the interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai.

The first accounts of the incident indicated that Rahman had been killed by a mob of Muslim pilgrims angry at the delays to their flights to Mecca to take part in the annual hajj religious ceremonies. The following day, however, Karzai announced dramatically that Rahman had been assassinated and ordered the arrest of several high-level figures, including three who had fled to Saudi Arabia.

Keen to dampen down fears of instability, Karzai has declared that the plot was carried out for "personal reasons" not for political ends. But he has answered none of the obvious questions about the motive or means for the murder. Why the conspirators would choose to kill Rahman in front of hundreds of people milling around an airport guarded by Afghan and international security forces remains unexplained.

Information Minister Syed Raheen Makhdoom, a Karzai loyalist, shed no more light on the matter. He said the vendetta against Rahman had included 20 members of the government and harked back to the days of "the resistance"—that is, to the guerilla war in the 1980s by US-backed Mujaheddin groups against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. But he provided no further information.

At least five officials have been arrested in Afghanistan. At Karzai's request, Saudi authorities have begun detaining the three who fled to Mecca—General Abdullah Jan Tawhidi, head of intelligence; Qalander Beg, a senior defence official; and Sananwal Haleem, a senior prosecutor in the justice ministry. Karzai told a further press conference last weekend that the culprits would be dealt with "very, very sternly," but declined to answer any questions on details of the incident.

Several media reports have questioned Karzai's version of events, citing eyewitnesses who insist that Muslim pilgrims mobbed Rahman as he boarded a flight bound for New Delhi. Some 7,000 people have been issued with Saudi visas to attend the hajj and paid around \$1,500 each—a small fortune in Afghan terms. Only a few hundred have been able to travel, resulting in a build up of anger and frustration.

According to a *Washington Post* journalist, "Numerous

witnesses, including security guards and pilgrims who were still at the airport this morning [last Friday], described seeing the crowd surround Rahman's plane about 6pm, push the minister out and begin beating him, even though he agreed to resign on the spot. Rahman was rescued and rushed to Kabul's military hospital, but officials said he died of his wounds Thursday night."

Whatever the exact circumstances, Karzai's accusation and the subsequent arrests place the murder firmly within the murky realm of Afghanistan's factional politics. To even begin to delve into the possible scenarios, one must bear in mind that Karzai's administration is a shaky alliance of four groupings that were compelled, through a mixture of threats and bribes by the major powers, to reach a deal in Bonn in December. Not only do the two main groups—the Northern Alliance and the royalists, who support the exiled Afghan king Zahir Shah—have axes to grind with each other but each of these camps are cesspools of petty ambition, rivalry and jealousy.

Rahman undoubtedly had his share of enemies. He was known in Northern Alliance circles as a turncoat—although that is not unusual among the Afghan ruling elite. As a member of Jamiat-i-Islami, one of the main Northern Alliance components, he had served as a minister in the administration of Burhanuddin Rabbini between 1992-96. He fled to the US after the Taliban seized Kabul and emerged as a supporter of the king.

Those accused by Karzai, who is a royalist, are all senior members of the Northern Alliance, which holds the key defence and interior portfolios. That fact would seem to indicate that Karzai is intent on using the murder against his factional foes. But political infighting in Kabul is never straightforward and other evidence points in different directions, including a possible split in the Northern Alliance ranks.

Immediately after the murder, Karzai called an emergency cabinet meeting and received the full backing of all the ministers. Northern Alliance leaders were prominent at Rahman's funeral. Over the weekend, Karzai noted approvingly that the names of the conspirators had been handed to him by the Northern Alliance leaders—Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim and Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni. Their conduct was, he proclaimed, "a very committed act of

patriotism”.

Further facts may or may not emerge about who was actually involved in the killing and for what reasons. But the least likely interpretation is the official one: rogue elements of the Northern Alliance kill a hatred rival minister, but not for political reasons, and their factional allies “patriotically” hand over the names to their foes. The whole affair reeks of political intrigue and double-dealing by everyone concerned—Karzai, Fahim, Qanooni and others—followed by a cabinet decision to bury the hatchet and present a united face, temporarily at least.

Karzai has seized on the incident to warn that he may be forced to call for a larger international security force with greater powers. The Bonn agreement only provides for a “peacekeeping” force of 5,000 troops, confined to Kabul and with restricted duties. Only about 3,200 soldiers have arrived in Afghanistan and their value in maintaining order in the prevailing anarchic conditions is perhaps summed up by the fact that Rahman’s murder took place just 400 metres from a group of British and French peacekeepers stationed at Kabul airport.

Karzai’s push for a stronger international force is not primarily a question of law-and-order in Kabul. While he was inserted to head the administration on the strength of his past ties with Washington, Karzai has no power base—outside his role as a traditional leader of one of the Pashtun tribes in south-eastern Afghanistan. He has no significant militia of his own and thus is at the mercy of other warlords and militia commanders who have carved up the country into their competing private domains.

To the extent that Karzai or his administration have any influence outside Kabul, where the international peacekeepers are based, it is dependent on its role as the dispenser of international funds and aid, or the control exercised by its various component factions. The Northern Alliance, which is based on ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras in the north of the country and has the largest militias, has previously opposed a major role for any international security force. With control of the defence portfolio, the grouping is ensuring its interests are secured in the formation of any national armed forces.

Outside Kabul, internecine violence is rife as factional and tribal leaders, militia commanders and other local despots vie for control. Each looks to Kabul to legitimise their local authority and for a share of the arms, money and aid coming from international sources. In some cases, particularly in the Pashtun areas in the south and east, the US security forces have further inflamed local tensions by providing money and arms to one local militia leader as against others in return for services rendered in fighting the remnants of the Taliban regime.

A recent article in the *Washington Post* outlined the situation in the eastern city of Jalalabad, near the Pakistan border. Three local figures—Hazrat Ali, the regional security commander; Mohammad Zaman Ghun Shareef, the military chief; and regional governor Abdul Qadir—are all vying to dominate the

city and the region. As the article points out, Ali is lording it over his rivals—at present—because of the ties he forged with the US military during operations in the nearby Tora Bora area. “Supported by US military might and dollars, Ali represents a potent new force in post-Taliban Afghanistan, challenging a weak central government that has no choice but to do business with him.”

While fierce rivalry in Jalalabad is yet to turn to open conflict, similar situations are replicated throughout the rest of the country—in the cities, towns and countryside—and, in some cases, fighting has erupted. To cite just two recent examples:

\* Four Afghan fighters and an aid worker were killed and around 30 people were wounded in clashes last weekend between rival militia at Khulm, about 50km east of the main northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. One group belongs to the mainly Tajik Jamiat-i-Islami faction of the Northern Alliance linked to Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim. The other comprises mainly Uzbek fighters loyal to Junbish-i-Millie, another Northern Alliance faction, loyal to Deputy Defence Minister Abdul Rashid Dostum. Some 40 people have died in fighting between the two factions over the last few weeks.

\* Another armed clash took place over the weekend in Paktia province, south east of Kabul. Members of the semi-nomadic Kochi tribe fired on soldiers linked to Paktia governor and warlord Bacha Khan, apparently in a dispute over land. The governor’s brother Kameel Khan accused the Kochi of sheltering Al Qaeda fighters and told the press that he had called on the US military to bomb the tribesmen.

Earlier in the month, sharp fighting erupted in the city of Gardez, also in Paktia, after Karzai’s appointment of Bacha Khan as provincial governor. Militia loyal to rival tribal leader Saifullah drove out Khan’s troops who were forced to abandon artillery pieces, pickups and around 400 prisoners. More than 60 people were believed to have died in the clashes before Karzai intervened to temporarily patch up the dispute.

It is possible that Abdul Rahman died at the hands of an angry mob. But the immediate accusations levelled by Karzai at high-level officials points to the extreme tensions wracking his administration, within Kabul and throughout the country. Far from opening up a new era of peace in Afghanistan, the US-led intervention has resulted in a hornet’s nest of local rivalries and ethnic conflicts that will only be further exacerbated by the continued presence of US and international troops.



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