

Kabul police raids aimed at intimidating political opposition

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6 April 2002

A series of police round-ups in Kabul over the last week have the character of a crude witchhunt aimed at silencing the political opponents of the US-backed interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai. The vague, contradictory and unsubstantiated nature of the accusations and the lack of detail about those detained simply confirm this conclusion.

Even the figures are doubtful. According to Interior Minister Yunis Qanooni, a member of the Northern Alliance, more than 300 people were detained for being engaged in “undermining, threatening, sabotaging and harming this government.” He claimed that a number of prominent figures had been targeted, including Karzai and the former king Zahir Shah, but admitted “the accusations are not yet proven”. Nearly half of those arrested were released through lack of evidence.

Others put the number detained far higher. One of Karzai’s senior advisers told the *New York Times* that more than 700 people had been arrested. Interior Ministry thugs attempted to prevent journalists interviewing those who were being released and threatened to beat up a photographer. But, according to the *Boston Globe*, some of the detainees spoke to reporters. They complained of wrongful arrest and cramped conditions and estimated that as many as 800 had been rounded up.

Many of those caught up in the police operation were completely innocent. “Haji Gula Mir Shah, 56, said he had come to Kabul from Logar Province to see a doctor and was in front of the Ministry of Public Health when he was grabbed by an intelligence agent,” the *Boston Globe* reported. Those released said they were interrogated about their political affiliations and their activities under the Taliban regime.

Qanooni denied that the police dragnet was aimed at stamping out political opposition and insisted “the issue has nothing to do with ethnicity.” Yet the National Directorate of Security, which carried out the arrests, is

firmly under the control of the Northern Alliance which is a loose coalition of militia groups based on ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. Qanooni along with Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim belong to the mainly Tajik Jamiat-e-Islami. The detainees are predominantly ethnic Pashtuns who live in the south and east of Afghanistan.

Interior Ministry officials alleged on Thursday that the chief culprit was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the Islamic extremist organisation Hezb-e-Islami, which rose to prominence in the 1980s when the CIA and Pakistani intelligence strongly favoured it over other Mujaheddin groups fighting the Soviet-backed administration in Kabul. Following the collapse of that regime, Hekmatyar engaged in bitter fighting with the militia that later formed the Northern Alliance destroying much of Kabul, briefly became prime minister, fought the Taliban and then fled to Iran after the fundamentalist militia seized the capital.

Hekmatyar’s whereabouts, however, are unknown after Iranian authorities, responding to US pressure, shut down his offices earlier in the year. Moreover, one of the main targets of the police raids was Wahidullah Sabawoon, a man who appears to have broken with Hekmatyar in 1996. Sabawoon remained as finance minister in the administration headed by President Burhanuddin Rabbani when Hekmatyar left for Iran. To complicate the issue even further, Sabawoon, like Northern Alliance leader Rabbani, was pushed aside at the UN conference in Bonn last December that installed Karzai.

Hezb-e-Islami’s Pakistan-based spokesman Ghairat Baheer denied the party had any involvement in the alleged plot or even that Sabawoon, as Kabul police chief General Deen Mohammad Jurat claimed, was Hekmatyar’s son-in-law. “These people are not related to Hezb. It is just an excuse. They have their own internal differences,” he said in Islamabad.

There is undoubtedly opposition to the Karzai regime. It

is quite possible that Hekmatyar, Sabawoon and Rabbani, as well as other political figures such as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a Pashtun Islamic leader, have been in contact. All of them are bitter about being left out of the Karzai administration and may even be scheming to rally support against it. Several newspaper articles have speculated on possible opposition alliances but none of these reports can be counted as reliable in the hothouse of rumour, intrigue, double-dealing and vested interests in Kabul.

There is no evidence, however, that any of alleged plotters have been preparing for sabotage or assassination. Kabul police claimed to have seized bomb-detonating devices and “documents” containing detailed plans. But even Qanooni was forced to note that the alleged plot never proceeded past the planning stage. None of the documents have been released, and, if one were to judge “plots” on the basis of stored weapons or explosives, a substantial portion of the country’s population would be equally “guilty”.

The police crackdown coincides with the announcement this week of the rules for the convening of a *loya jirga* or tribal assembly in mid-June. The gathering is to select a transitional administration to replace the present interim arrangements and to establish the mechanisms for drawing up a constitution, consolidating the state apparatus and holding national elections. Already intense jockeying has begun to determine the 1,450 delegates who will be either appointed or chosen through indirect, unrepresentative polls—methods that are subject to the whole gamut of influences from bribery to intimidation.

This week’s police raids have all the hallmarks of the latter—an attempt to intimidate, harass and possibly jail the more outspoken critics of the Karzai regime. Hekmatyar has been singled out as a convenient target because, unlike the other warlords and militia leaders who quickly fell into line with Washington, he has been openly critical of US military aggression in Afghanistan. As a result, Interior Ministry officials have been quick to allege, without any evidence, that Hekmatyar is intriguing with the Taliban—ignoring the fact that the two groups were bitter enemies in the mid-1990s.

According to the *Washington Post*, the raids have not been confined to Hekmatyar’s organisation. Over the last week, a group of Sayyaf’s supporters have also been detained, allegedly for “criminal and violent activities”. A spokesman for the British-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, Lieutenant Colonel Neal Peckham, told the media that Sayyaf’s men were accused of “instigating troubles” but was unable to say if

these arrests were linked to the broader round-up of Sabawoon’s supporters.

One aspect of the police operation would tend to indicate that Qanooni and the Northern Alliance are targetting rivals inside the administration as well as figures like Hekmatyar. The *Boston Globe* reported: “Several associates of Karzai, who is a Pashtun, were swept up in last week’s sting, including a deputy agriculture minister, the governor of Paktia Province, a senior judge, and a special adviser to Karzai, according to detainees interviewed. Karzai did not know about or approve the sting, according to one of his associates who has been released.”

The whole episode highlights the role of the US in Afghanistan.

ISAF spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Neal Peckham was circumspect in his comments on the police operation but did acknowledge that the British-led force had been forewarned and advised to keep away from certain areas. Another representative, Flight Lieutenant Anthony Marshall, expressed scepticism about the purpose of the round-up, saying: “I think we would know if there was an [anti-government] coup plot.”

But if the ISAF command was informed then the US military and the CIA certainly knew about the police raids and, at the very least, gave the nod of approval. Given the political clout the US carries in Kabul, the mere hint of opposition from Washington would have been enough to prevent the operation. The round-up reveals a distinct nervousness about the emergence of any opposition to the Karzai administration and provides a clear indication of the methods that will be used to suppress it.



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