

Another murky political intrigue

Afghan vice-president murdered in broad daylight

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The murder of Afghan Vice President Haji Abdul Qadir, who was gunned down in broad daylight in the middle of Kabul on Saturday, provides a glimpse into the murky world of political intrigue and thuggery that surrounds the newly installed administration of transitional president Hamid Karzai.

Qadir, 48, was only appointed as public works minister and one of the country's five vice presidents a fortnight ago. Two gunmen ambushed his four-wheel-drive Toyota Land Cruiser around 12.30pm, shortly after it left the ministry compound. Qadir and his driver were killed in a hail of automatic gunfire. The two assassins escaped in a taxi.

Speculation over who ordered the murder is rife. Qadir was an influential warlord and businessman from the eastern city of Jalalabad, who was notorious for his association with the region's lucrative smuggling operations and opium trade. He had a long list of enemies, ranging from local rivals in Jalalabad to bitter opponents in the cabinet itself, all of whom had the motive and means to send two gunmen to kill Qadir.

Qadir's sordid past is well known in Washington. President Bush alluded to the vice-president's associations in his comments on the murder. "There's all kinds of scenarios as to who killed him," he declared. "It could be drug lords, it could be longtime rivals. All we know is a good man is dead and we mourn his loss." It is precisely such a collection of "good men"—local gangsters in all but name—that the US backed to overthrow the Taliban and form the new government in Kabul.

Like the rest of the Karzai administration, Qadir had no popular mandate. Karzai appointed Qadir, a Pashtun, in a bid to balance the influence of non-Pashtun ethnic groups associated with the Northern Alliance in his cabinet. The assassination threatens to plunge the government into

crisis as accusations and counter-accusations are traded across the cabinet table.

Karzai visited the hospital where Qadir's body was taken, then convened an emergency cabinet meeting. It is clear nobody trusts anyone. The investigation was effectively taken out of the hands of the police and put under the control of a special five-member committee. Karzai indicated that, if necessary, he would call on "our foreign friends and related organisations for help" in the inquiry.

No group has claimed responsibility for the assassination. So far the only individuals to be detained for questioning are 10 security guards at the Public Works Ministry who have been heavily criticised for failing to protect Qadir or catch his assassins. Most members of the security apparatus in Kabul owe their loyalty to factions of the Northern Alliance—in particular, Defence Minister General Qassim Fahim, Foreign Affairs Minister Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Education Minister Younis Qanooni, all Tajiks.

Whether or not any of them had a hand in the murder is impossible to say. Senior members of the Northern Alliance, including former head of intelligence, General Abdullah Jan Tawhidil, were arrested over the murder of Tourism and Aviation Minister Abdul Rahman at Kabul airport in February. The crime, which was initially blamed on Muslim pilgrims angry at delays over their departure for Mecca, is still unsolved.

Northern Alliance leaders were certainly annoyed at Qadir's criticisms of the domination of non-Pashtuns in the Karzai administration. At the same time, however, he was a figure they could do business with. Qadir had fought alongside the Northern Alliance against the Taliban and was condemned by local Pashtun rivals for "selling out" to the Tajiks.

Politics in Kabul is not determined simply by Pashtun-Tajik rivalry. There is a complex and shifting web of alliances and rivalries involving local satraps, militia commanders and tribal leaders in which ethnicity, religion, clan and foreign backing are all factors as the warlords manoeuvre and plot to defend their vested interests and fiefdoms.

It is just as likely that Qadir was killed by local rivals as by enemies in Kabul or among the ousted Taliban regime. He was born into a prominent family in Jalalabad and was a member of the Hebz-i-Islami faction led by Yunis Khalis, one of the Mujaheddin commanders armed and financed by the CIA to fight the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s. Qadir made a fortune as a kingpin in the large-scale smuggling rackets that operated from Afghanistan into Pakistan.

After the collapse of the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime in 1992, Qadir became governor of Nangarhar province, the region surrounding Jalalabad near the Pakistani border. The area was notorious for the cultivation of opium poppies and production of heroin—a business in which the CIA-backed Mujaheddin groups were intimately involved. He was criticised repeatedly by the UN for failing to curb poppy production. Qadir’s smuggling operations were so lucrative that he bought his own private fleet of Russian-built Antonov cargo planes at a cost of more than \$50 million to ferry expensive consumer goods from Dubai to Jalalabad for dispatch to Pakistan.

Qadir flourished in the chaos of competing warlords that emerged following the fall of Najibullah. He presided over the Jalalabad shura (Islamic council) until the Taliban militia, which emerged in 1994 with Pakistani and Saudi Arabian backing, seized the city in 1996. Even then, Qadir is reported to have made a tidy profit. According to one commentator: “Pakistan and Saudi Arabia helped engineer the surrender and eventual flight of the head of the Jalalabad shura, Haji Abdul Qadir. He was given a large bribe, reported by some Afghans to be \$US10 million in cash, as well as guarantees that his assets and bank accounts in Pakistan would not be frozen.”

Qadir soon fell out with Pakistani authorities. He spent the next three years shuttling between Dubai and Germany engaged in business dealings as well as scheming with other militia leaders against the Taliban. He then joined up with the Northern Alliance militia in the Panjshir Valley led by Ahmed Shah Masud, who was assassinated last September. Qadir’s brother Abdul Haq,

who had close connections with the CIA in the 1980s, was executed last October by the Taliban after being caught trying to foment opposition to their rule.

After the collapse of the Taliban regime, Qadir returned to Jalalabad and retook his old post of Nangarhar governor with the backing of the Northern Alliance. However, he had at least two political rivals in the region—the militia commanders Hazarat Ali and Haji Mohammed Zaman. All three vied for the support of the US as they sought to establish their control over Jalalabad.

The rivalry intensified during the US-led offensive in the Tora Bora region near Jalalabad last December. While providing some troops for the operation, Qadir also made a profit organising expensive accommodation and transport for the small army of foreign journalists who arrived to witness the battle. Rival Zaman accused Qadir not only of running “a racket” but of assisting senior Al Qaeda leaders to escape to Pakistan.

Qadir also had enemies among the local drug barons. He was accused of manipulating the country’s Western-financed drug eradication program to siphon off money and narcotics for his private benefit. In early April, he narrowly escaped with his life while accompanying Defence Minister Fahim on a visit to Jalalabad. The rockets fired at the official convoy were thought to be aimed at Fahim. Both men, however, may have been the targets as the trip was to inaugurate the poppy eradication program.

Which enemy or combination of enemies murdered Qadir will probably never be known. That he survived as long as he did is testimony to his own ruthlessness in dealing with rivals. Far from being the exception, Qadir epitomises the layers who hold the leading positions both in the Karzai administration and at the regional and local levels. Far from inaugurating a new period of democracy and peace in Afghanistan, the US invasion has simply changed one gang of thugs for another. Qadir’s murder is a sign of what is to come.



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