Killing of Karzai's brother deepens US crisis in Afghanistan

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Tuesday's killing of Ahmed Wali Karzai, the Afghan president's half brother, represents a serious blow to US strategy in the key southern province of Kandahar.

The powerful Kandahar warlord and longtime asset of the US Central Intelligence Agency was shot in the chest and the head by one of his henchmen, described by associates as one of the most trusted commanders of the militia gunmen loyal to Karzai.

The Taliban took credit for the assassination, claiming that the gunman, Sardar Mohammad, had been recruited a "long time" ago and had finally gotten "the chance today and achieved the objective." It described the killing as one of its "biggest achievements." Mohammad was killed by other bodyguards immediately after shooting Karzai.

Mohammad had reportedly worked for Karzai for the last seven years, commanding militiamen who man roadblocks around the family's village of Karz in the Dand district, south of Kandahar City.

Initially there were suggestions that the killing was the result of a personal dispute. But, while Kandahar's acting chief of police, General Abdul Raziq, described the assassin as a "good friend" of Karzai, he announced at a press conference in Kandahar City that several suspects had been arrested in connection with the assassination and were undergoing interrogation.

Raziq, who assumed his post after his predecessor was assassinated by a Taliban infiltrator on April 15, said that he could not rule out the involvement of a "foreign hand" in the latest killing and described Karzai's death as a "big loss."

A favorite of the US military occupation authorities, Raziq—like Karzai himself—has been linked in published reports to the region's lucrative opium trade and is charged by critics with carrying out systematic extra-judicial executions of suspected "insurgents."

Kandahar Governor Tooryalai Wesa went further, calling the assassination "a catastrophe for everyone," asserting that Karzai had "helped bring peace and stability to the region."

In reality, Karzai functioned as the province's de facto governor and more. Described as the "king of Kandahar," his official title was head of the provincial council. His power, however, flowed from his relationship to his brother's central government and his control over a string of private security companies that have held a virtual monopoly over security operations for supply convoys and private contractors.

The armed militias under his direction also included the Kandahar Strike Force, a clandestine outfit that worked with the CIA and US Special Forces troops in death squad operations directed against suspected insurgents.

Ahmad Karzai has also been accused of making millions by shaking down contractors, appropriating lucrative land and water resources and monopolizing foreign loans and grants.

The younger Karzai also provided key support to his brother, President Hamid Karzai, helping him to rig the results in favor of his reelection in 2009.

In a June 2009 classified diplomatic cable release by WikiLeaks last December, US officials in Afghanistan provided a candid portrayal of the president's brother. "As the kingpin of Kandahar, Ahmed Wali Karzai (AWK) dominates access to economic resources, patronage, and protection," the cable states. "Much of the real business of running Kandahar takes place out of public sight, where AWK operates, parallel to formal government structures, through a network of political clans that use state institutions to protect and enable licit and illicit enterprises."

The cable describes the younger Karzai as Kandahar's "unrivaled strongman," while acknowledging that he is "widely unpopular in Kandahar" because of his deep-going corruption. The "overriding purpose that unifies his political roles as chairman of the Kandahar provincial council and as the president's personal representative to the south is the enrichment, extension and perpetuation of the Karzai clan," according to the cable.

In October 2009, the *New York Times* cited unnamed US government sources who provided detailed information on Karzai's intimate links to the heroin trade as well as the fact that he had been on the CIA's payroll since 2001. US military and government officials expressed a desire to see the younger Karzai sent out of the country and fears that his corrupt activities were fueling hatred for the US-led occupation and the Karzai regime.

A second cable released by WikiLeaks, drafted in February 2010, described a meeting of US diplomatic, military and intelligence officials on what measures to "employ against

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criminal and corrupt Afghan officials." In particular, it focused on the need to take action against "three prominent Afghan malign actors": Abdul Raziq, the current chief of police in Kandahar, Ahmed Wali Karzai (now assassinated), and Asadullah Sherzad, who at the time was the chief of police in neighboring Helmand province.

A month later an unnamed "senior US military official" told the Reuters news agency that he wanted Ahmed Karzai "out of there," because he was "so divisive." He added that the only way that the military could act was if it could "link him to the insurgency." In that case he said, "… we can put him on the (target list) and capture and kill him."

In June of last year, the *Washington Post* reported on a March 2010 meeting in which Gen. Stanley McChrystal, then senior US military commander in Afghanistan, was presented dossiers detailing Ahmed Wali Karzai's corruption. According to the *Post*, at the end of the meeting McChrystal "directed his subordinates to 'stop saying bad stuff about AWK' and instead to work with him."

This remained the policy of Gen. David Petraeus, who took over from McChrystal shortly thereafter and has now relinquished the Afghanistan command to become director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

As one of his last official acts, Petraeus offered his "personal sympathy and condolences" to the Afghan president over the death of his brother, the Kandahar warlord, and vowed that US occupation forces would work "in every possible way to bring to justice" anyone involved in the killing.

As the Obama administration launched its surge of 30,000 troops, directed overwhelmingly into the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, Petraeus, McChrystal and other US officials determined that Ahmed Karzai was an indispensable asset, despite fears that his ostentatious corruption provided a major source of support for the armed groups opposing the Karzai regime and foreign occupation.

As a US official told the *Washington Post* last year, "If you take out Karzai, you don't have good governance, you have no governance. He's done very good things for the United States. He's effective."

The fact that nearly 10 years into the US war Washington was dependent on such a figure is incontrovertible evidence of the criminal and semi-colonial character of this war and the lack of any genuine popular support for either foreign occupation or the corrupt regime that it has installed in Kabul.

Now he has been "taken out," and the prospects for his demise producing "good governance" are nil.

Whether the Taliban, which has repeatedly tried to kill Ahmed Karzai in the past, was really responsible for Tuesday's assassination is unclear. It has in the past claimed responsibility for acts carried out by others, and there are certainly many others with reasons for wanting to murder the warlord, ranging from competing drug traffickers, rival tribal leaders and potentially even those within his own organization seeking to take his place by means of a gangland-style killing.

The *New York Times* reported worriedly that the demise of the younger Karzai raised the threat of a "vacuum of authority" in southern Afghanistan's Pashtun region and posed a "struggle for control" and the "possibility of more bloodletting" as rival clans fight for dominance.

Whoever was responsible for Karzai's killing, the attack, coming in the wake of the assault on the Inter-Continental Hotel in Kabul two weeks ago and the earlier high-profile assassinations of the Kandahar police chief and others, only confirms the popular perception that the government and the foreign occupation troops are incapable of protecting top officials and supporters.

The killing also underscores the crisis confronting the Obama administration and the US military as they prepare to implement a withdrawal of 33,000 US troops by the end of next year. While nearly 70,000 US soldiers and Marines will remain in the occupied country, the withdrawal plan is predicated on Afghan security forces and the Afghan government taking greater responsibility for suppressing resistance. The role played by a figure like Ahmed Karzai and the crisis provoked by his demise only demonstrate the thoroughly rotten and impotent character of this government that Washington installed by invading Afghanistan.

On the same day that Ahmed Karzai was assassinated in Kandahar, officials in eastern Logar province reported that a NATO air strike the day before had killed at least 16 people.

"Twelve civilians, including women and children, were killed last night when NATO planes targeted two houses," a regional police chief told AFP. The official claimed that four suspected members of the Taliban also died in the attack. The strike was reportedly directed at a house where Taliban members were meeting, but also destroyed a neighboring home.

The deadly attack comes just days after another air strike in southeastern Khost province killed another 13 civilians, including eight children and three women.

The number of air strikes conducted by US and NATO warplanes has escalated sharply since the onset of the surge and is expected to increase even further as the partial withdrawal of US ground forces leaves the occupation more dependent upon air power.

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