Second Karzai ally assassinated in Afghanistan

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Jan Mohammad Khan, one of the closest supporters of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, was assassinated in his Kabul residence on Sunday night. Despite heavy security, three well-armed men managed to infiltrate the compound at around 7.30 p.m. Along with Khan, the dead included several bodyguards and Hashem Watanwal, a member of the Afghan parliament from Uruzgan province. According to witnesses, the assassins held off New Zealand and Afghan special forces until the early hours of Monday morning before they were gunned down.

A spokesman for the Taliban government-in-exile claimed responsibility for the killing. The assassination took place just seven days after Karzai's half-brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, was shot dead by a longstanding bodyguard at his home in Kandahar province. The Taliban also claimed responsibility, alleging that the bodyguard, who was well known to US forces and the CIA, had always been an insurgent sleeper.

The deaths of Karzai's half-brother and Khan are significant blows to the US puppet regime in Kabul. Both were powerful figures within Karzai's Popolzai tribe and at the apex of a nepotistic web of business interests—both legal and illegal—and tribal loyalties on which the president depends to exert authority in southern Afghanistan. The US and NATO forces operating in the south have turned a blind eye to the criminality of the pro-Karzai Pashtun warlords in order to harness their support behind operations against anti-occupation insurgents.

Ahmad Wali Karzai, whose official position was head of the Kandahar provincial council, presided over a network of businesses that raked in large amounts of money from international "reconstruction" and "aid" contracts. He operated private security companies and militias that have been consistently accused of involvement in opium production and trafficking. He was widely believed to have directed the massive vote-rigging in Kandahar and other southern areas that delivered the two Afghan presidential elections to Hamid Karzai.

Jan Mohammad Khan has long been associated with the Karzai family. Khan's family dominates much of Uruzgan province. Following the US invasion, he took the position of Uruzgan governor and was accused of eliminating potential rivals by alleging their association with the former Taliban regime. While he was governor, opium production in the province more than tripled, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Villagers alleged that UN-funded eradication programs were used to destroy the crops of growers who did not make the necessary pay-offs to the Khan-controlled authorities.

In 2006, Hamid Karzai summoned Khan to Kabul to become his advisor. Dutch forces, who had been assigned military control in Uruzgan, had complained to the US military that his brutal repression of tribal rivals, corruption and suspected control over opium trafficking were fuelling the insurgency.

Khan agreed to leave the province, but his influence in Uruzgan continued. His nephew, Matiullah Khan, emerged as the head of a 2,000-strong private militia with intimate relations to the Australian military forces operating in the province. In recent years, US and Australian newspapers have documented allegations against Khan's forces, which include charging "protection" levies on vehicles crossing the province, kidnappings and involvement in the drug trade. Militia members wear a shoulder patch that combines the Afghan and Australian flags, and assist the combat operations of Australian and US special forces.

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The killings of Karzai and Khan are only the highest profile executions this year. The Taliban and other insurgent organisations have stepped up their operations against the pro-occupation regime, claiming responsibility for a wave of assassinations and attempted assassinations against police and Afghan Army commanders, members of the national and provincial parliaments and tribal leaders.

Other victims this year include Kandahar's deputy governor, Kandahar's police chief and Mohammad Daoud Daoud, a veteran of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance who headed the police in eight provinces of northern Afghanistan. The governor of Helmand province, which along with Kandahar is considered the frontline of the insurgency, narrowly survived a roadside bombing in May. In 2010, according to the UN, at least 140 government officials were assassinated.

At one level, the campaign of targeted killings is retaliation for the constant assassination of insurgent leaders and sympathisers by American, British and Australian special forces and the regular missile attacks on alleged hide-outs in Pakistan's tribal agencies by remote-controlled Predator drones. While there is no precise figure, the number of Afghans assassinated by the occupation forces runs into the thousands.

The spiraling violence is in stark contrast to the claims of the Obama administration and various NATO countries that the surge of additional troops over the past two years is bringing the country under control. The prognosis offered by NATO and US forces is that the Afghan army and police will be capable of independently combatting what remains of insurgent activity by the end of 2014, allowing most foreign troops to leave.

In reality, the insurgency shows every sign that it has survived the intensified US-led military operations and is growing as a result of pervasive popular hatred for the foreign military occupation and for the corrupt and dysfunctional Karzai regime.

The killing of Khan inside his Kabul safe house, just weeks after militants infiltrated the heavily-guarded Intercontinental Hotel in the city, suggests a high degree of collaboration with the insurgency within the Afghan government and security forces. It has heightened fears that insurgents can reach anywhere.

Haroun Mir, the director of the Afghanistan Centre for Policy Research and Studies in Kabul, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the wave of targeted killings had "created certainly a panic among a lot of people in Afghanistan and a lot of people are afraid that they might be the next person on the list of the Taliban." He claimed that numbers of senior government figures had either left the country with their families or refused to leave their guarded compounds in Kabul.

Thomas Ruttig of the Kabul-based Afghan Analysts Network told the British *Guardian* that such high-profile attacks fuelled perceptions that Karzai's government and the occupation forces could not "protect his closest allies." Ruttig observed: "People will hedge their bets, in case the Taliban will come back some day. They will make deals so they can survive that. With the first Western soldiers leaving there is an atmosphere of concern and fear... They don't trust that the institutions are sustainable enough to survive."

A recent report by the European-based International Crisis Group suggested that members of the Afghan establishment are indeed hedging their bets. It alleged that its surveys demonstrated there was widespread collusion between business figures, government officials and various insurgent organisations. The report claimed that business activities ranging from construction to mining and apple-growing were taking place with the Taliban's permission, in exchange for payments. It also said the militant Haqqani network operated its own businesses in Kabul.

Despite Obama's claims of "progress," there are indications that the US and other occupying powers are seeking a peace deal with an insurgency they cannot defeat militarily. British Foreign Secretary William Hague confirmed that talks had taken place. The *Washington Post* and *New York Times* reported this month that US officials had also conducted recent talks.

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