

High profile assassinations continue in southern Afghanistan

James Cogan
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High-profile collaborators of the US-led occupation in the ethnic Pashtun provinces of southern Afghanistan are being systematically targeted for assassination. The Islamist Taliban government-in-exile has claimed responsibility for a wave of attacks last month in which assassins were able to circumvent the security surrounding their intended victims.

Taken together, the attacks during July discredit the claim of the Obama administration and its NATO allies that the occupation can pronounce victory and withdraw most of the occupying force by the end of 2014. In the space of just a few weeks, the power structures that have served the US-led forces in two key southern provinces have been plunged into disarray.

The most recent attack took place on July 28. In a heavily-guarded area of the city of Tarin Kowt, men drove explosive-filled vehicles to the residence of Omar Shirzad, the governor of Uruzgan province, and rammed them into its walls. The suicide bombers were followed by heavily-armed assailants who tried to storm the building and the neighbouring police chief headquarters. Shirzad's deputy governor and key staff were also present, suggesting the attackers had inside information as to the best time to strike.

A simultaneous assault was launched against the nearby compound of Matiullah Khan, a tribal warlord who rules large areas of Uruzgan through a 2,000-strong private army that works closely with the Australian troops operating in the province.

Both attacks were fought off by bodyguards, Afghan security personnel and Australian and US special forces, who were rushed to the scene to protect two of their leading supporters in Uruzgan. The governor, his staff and Matiullah Khan survived unscathed and have been protected since by Australian troops. BBC journalist Omaid Khpalwak, who was in the building at the time, was among some 20 people killed. It is still unclear whether his death was caused by the

assailants or the defenders.

The Tarin Kowt attack followed the July 17 assassination in Kabul of Mohammed Jan Khan, Matiullah Khan's uncle and tribal overlord who was serving as a top advisor to Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

A leader of Karzai's Pashtun Popalzai tribe, Khan used his tribal militia to seize control of much of Uruzgan following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001. He was installed as governor by Karzai. In 2006, he was removed from his position due to complaints by Dutch commanders that his forces were engaged in drug trafficking and other criminal activity, and were alienating the population with their brutal vendettas against tribal opponents. Khan moved to Kabul to work with Karzai and delegated affairs in Uruzgan to Matiullah.

Over the past five years, the Khan clan has continued to profit handsomely from the US-led occupation. It has amassed millions of dollars from "protection" tolls on vehicles travelling between Tarin Kowt and Kandahar, and from payments for providing armed assistance to Australian and US military operations. The Khan militia is strongly suspected of organising the harvesting and trafficking of the province's substantial opium crop. If the claims are true, then occupation forces have turned a blind eye in return for assistance in combating Taliban insurgents.

Despite the heavy protection provided to Mohammed Jan Khan, three armed men were able to enter his fortified private residence in Kabul undetected and assassinate him. A prominent member of the Afghan parliament from Uruzgan, Mohammed Hashem Watanwal, was also killed. The attack two weeks later on the governor and Matiullah, his tribal heir, suggests that a well-coordinated attempt is being made to eliminate the Khan family's power in the province.

An equally well-planned campaign appears to be taking

place to eliminate the main props of the occupation in the key province of Kandahar.

On July 27, the mayor of Kandahar city since 2006, 63-year-old dual American citizen Ghulam Haider Hameedi, was killed by a suicide bomber in his compound. The man got past security with a bomb concealed in his head gear and detonated it as Hameedi customarily embraced him.

Hameedi's death was blamed by his family not on the Taliban but on elements in the city and the Karzai government itself who were disgruntled with his alleged anti-corruption operations to take back public land illegally expropriated by private businessmen. Contradicting this claim, however, is the fact that Hameedi had been a collaborator for a number of years with the most corrupt figure in Kandahar, Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's half-brother.

Following the ousting of the Taliban, Ahmed Wali transformed Kandahar city and the surrounding area into a virtual Karzai fiefdom, complete with family-run security and transport companies that received multi-million dollar contracts from the occupation forces. He was repeatedly accused of directing large-scale drug trafficking and rigging elections to ensure the victory of favoured candidates—including Hameedi. The CIA allegedly made personal payments to him for his support for the occupation.

Ahmed Wali was shot dead last month by Sardar Mohammad, one of his closest and longest serving bodyguards, who was immediately killed by other security personnel before he could be questioned. The Taliban has claimed Sardar was a "sleeper," biding his time to ensure he inflicted a lethal blow on one of the most prominent representatives of the US-led occupation regime. To counter the Taliban claims, Afghan government representatives have insisted that Sardar's only motive was an unspecified personal dispute.

More than a dozen lower-ranking officials were also killed last month, along with scores of Afghan government security personnel and civilians who were at the scene of assassination missions.

The ongoing killings have triggered panic in the pro-occupation Afghan elite. They demonstrate that the "surge" of tens of thousands of additional US troops ordered by Barack Obama has failed to shatter the insurgency. Washington had held out the prospect that military pressure would force sections of the Taliban and other anti-

occupation organisations to surrender and enter into "peace" talks. Instead, it is Karzai's limited support base that is coming apart.

On a visit to Afghanistan last week, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen spoke of the growing concern in Washington over the "criminal patronage networks" linked to Karzai's regime. His statements reinforced the most recent assessment by the European-based International Crisis Group. The ICG indicted Afghan officials and business figures for forging a "criminal nexus" with the Taliban and other insurgent organisations, in anticipation of their likely return to power.

At the same time, the Afghan elites are looting everything they can from so-called reconstruction and aid money from international donors and sending it offshore—along with their families. The World Bank has estimated that 97 percent of legal economic activity in Afghanistan is dependent on foreign financial injections. Summing up the utter criminality of the US-backed regime, Thomas Ruttig, the co-director of the Kabul-based Afghanistan Analysts Network, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* last month: "You now have this stealing-and-putting-it-in-Dubai-accounts spree. A lot of money is now going out of the country because people need insurance for post-2014 and that includes the government."

The venal elements in Afghanistan who supported the invasion of the country no longer believe that debt-stricken US imperialism or its equally crisis-ridden European allies will prevail over the entrenched resistance to foreign occupation among the Afghan people. They expect that the war will end in a total debacle for the major powers and a deal that sees the Taliban return in some form.



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