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For Afghans in Kunduz, Taliban Assault Is Just the Latest Affront

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

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From the early days of his presidency last year, President Ashraf Ghani knew he faced a national security threat in the northern Afghan province of Kunduz. He installed a new governor, a new police chief and a new head of intelligence, and spoke of turning Kunduz into an example of what better governance could accomplish. Instead, it has become a sobering testament to the cost of failed governance.

The fall of the provincial capital, Kunduz City, to the Taliban nine days ago was partly born of years of disgust with and distrust in the main representatives of the central government there: a succession of corrupt or ineffective governors and aides, and a horde of Afghan Local Police militiamen who were more often abusive than responsible.

Interviews with officials and residents of Kunduz indicate that despite Mr. Ghani's vow to improve things, frustrations in the province had been boiling even before the Taliban's recent assault.

Most of those interviewed described feeling abandoned by the government, and left at the mercy of local strongmen and militia leaders — including the Afghan Local Police — and, in recent months, to the steady advance of the Taliban toward the city.

Increasingly, that distrust has manifested in ethnic and factional divisions that carry uncomfortable echoes of the Afghan civil war. Deeply disillusioned by the government's and the security forces' failure in Kunduz, many residents are simply leaving. Others are looking for help from ethnic militias, or even the Taliban.

Compounding skepticism toward the government was the absence of the provincial governor, Omar Safi, when the city fell. Mr. Safi, who was appointed governor by Mr. Ghani, had already been accused of being corrupt and out of touch. He surfaced in Kabul, the capital, earlier this week but declined requests for an interview Wednesday. Also missing from the fray were many members of the Afghan Local Police, who when faced with a Taliban assault decided not to fight.

In one sign of how disaffected some in Kunduz had become, when the Taliban came knocking on people's doors, some residents opened them and let them in, according to local officials and witness accounts.

Even pro-government residents and Afghan security officials now admit that part of the assault on Kunduz started from within the city: Many of the Taliban fighters had been hiding in people's homes before they launched an inside-out offensive.

"The Taliban never confronted the front lines of the army," said Hameedullah Baluch, a civil society activist in Kunduz, who remained in the area during the assault but retreated temporarily to the airport where the security forces took refuge. "But where I was in the city they attacked the police stations, they were already inside."

Kunduz Province is a microcosm of Afghanistan with its ethnic patchwork, its long history of armed commanders of all stripes, and its uneasy relationship with the central government. It is also a strategic and psychological key to controlling northeastern Afghanistan, with roads that lead north to the Tajikistan border and south to Kabul. It is a place the government can ill afford to lose.

As early as 2009, American officials were worried by a growing Taliban presence in the province, and began training and paying local militiamen as a defense force. Most later became Afghan Local Police, brought under the Interior Ministry. But others remained armed even without the official cover.

The Germans, who were responsible for securing the north of the country until 2014, supported development projects in the city — including one that provided clean drinking water for the first time — in an effort to show people the potential benefits of good government.

But none of that worked the way the West hoped it would. The Afghan Local Police program was deeply flawed, and to residents, Mr. Ghani's moves seemed just more in a succession of bad policies inflicted on the province.

“The central governor airlifted a new governor in by parachute to lead Kunduz, which he couldn’t and which eventually led to the fall of the city,” said Qadir Hussainkhel, a former chairman of the Kunduz Provincial Council.

“This was the weakest governor Kunduz ever had,” he said, before admitting: “Kunduz never had a good governor.”

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the country’s chief executive and a northerner, agreed that the central government had not served Kunduz well. “Positive change had not taken place in Kunduz; the people were not happy,” he said in an interview with The New York Times. But he insisted that it was not a case of people preferring the Taliban to the government.

Part of the problem, particularly in Kunduz, was that even as the number of Afghan Local Police members grew, the militiamen remained more loyal to their old commanders than to the government.

Individual units tended to be from a single ethnicity: Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara or Turkmen. So rather than each group reflecting the diversity of the province, they reflected its divisions. Largely left out were Pashtuns, which heightened their already keen sense of being ethnically disadvantaged in Kunduz.

For the most part, the local police, who received just three weeks of training, were the same unaccountable gunmen they had been before. They made only a small salary, rarely exceeding $120 a month after their commanders took a cut, and many supplemented that income by abusing local people and collecting the usher, an Islamic tax, much as the Taliban do. And like street gangs, they fought one another for turf, sometimes killing civilians in the crossfire.

Most often those they intimidated were Pashtuns, who were often seen as allied with the Taliban whether they were or not. That in turn made Pashtuns more hostile to the government.

In 2012, the director for the United Nations human rights division in Afghanistan at the time, James Rodehaver, said of the northern Afghan Local Police: “If you are trying to pull a country together, you have a lot of trouble doing it if all you have are monoethnic armed groups that have no accountability except to local political figures: That’s what brought 30 years of armed conflict.”

For Kunduz residents, it all added up to a lot of men with guns.

“The main problem is that some people in our city are Taliban and some are local police,” said Sighbatullah, 25, an agronomy lecturer at Kunduz University, who like many Afghans uses just one name.

“They both do the same thing,” he said. “The local police are smuggling drugs, treating the people badly and so the Taliban see this situation and they know the government doesn’t do anything for us, and therefore they can get people to join the Taliban.”

This was the Kunduz that Mr. Ghani inherited, and his efforts to remake it ran afoul of the past.

According to people in Kunduz, Mr. Ghani’s first mistake was in choosing as the new governor Mr. Safi, whose main experience as an administrator of nonprofit groups seemed a poor fit for the job. Mr. Ghani’s second mistake, they say, was ordering the governor to get rid of illegitimate armed groups, which he tried to do. That made him more enemies than friends in Kunduz, particularly among the powerful commanders whose help he needed against a resurgent Taliban.

Some accuse Mr. Safi of actually working to give the Taliban an advantage in its conquest — by trying to strip the city of potential militia defenders, and by working with the intelligence services to enlist and arm more Pashtun militiamen, some of whom are accused of helping the Taliban get into the city.

Nine days after the fall of Kunduz, the city has been only partly reclaimed by the Afghan security forces. And Afghan generals say the city will not be truly safe until all of Kunduz Province is reclaimed.

Locals believe that, too. Sighbatullah fled the city on Friday after five days of Taliban occupation. The Taliban were constantly in and out of his house, using his roof as a firing position, he said.

The situation’s intractability has undermined his faith in the Ghani government, he added.

“We thought Ashraf Ghani was better than Hamid Karzai,” he said. “But now we see Hamid Karzai was better than Ashraf Ghani, because when he was governing we didn’t face problems like having our city in the control of the Taliban.”

“I will not return until they have cleared every district in the province,” he added. “If any Taliban are left there, they will come back.”