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Afghan president under siege as violence, joblessness persists

By Pamela Constable By Pamela Constable
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Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani talks with journalists during a press conference in Kabul on July 11

An ominous rumble of discontent is sweeping Afghanistan, driven by a mixture of anxiety, anger, frustration and political opportunism.

In the past two months, a mélange of new opposition groups has emerged, some with noble-sounding names and reformist agendas, led by an improbable assortment of tribal leaders, ethnic militia bosses, disaffected public appointees and young professionals. Even an old communist general has joined the fray with a new, pointedly non-leftist party called “The Homeland Movement.”

Their demands include individual grievances, and several of the more controversial leaders have grabbed most of the attention. But their broader message is remarkably similar: the government of President Ashraf Ghani has failed to protect the public and provide jobs. The president has overreached his executive powers and excluded diverse points of view. He must act now, produce meaningful reforms and legitimize his fractured, teetering government — or else.

The object of this barrage is a cerebral, single-minded man of 68 who spends 18-hour days reading policy reports, holding team meetings, addressing conferences and huddling with aides, seemingly determined to power through the latest crisis as his troubled government nears three years in office. Ghani’s aides insist the real impetus behind much of the opposition is a mix of anxiety among traditional leaders who are losing power in a modernizing state, and a broader opposition to reform from those who have long benefited from systemic public corruption.

“The old guard is desperate to stick to the status quo, with the entrenched patronage networks that always decided who got what. Now a new educated generation has emerged, and the president is empowering people on the basis of merit,” said one recent Ghani appointee, speaking on the condition of anonymity. “It is very risky for the president to take this stand,” he added, noting that many such leaders gained power through armed conflicts. “The old guard’s survival is at stake, and they know if they lose they will become irrelevant.”

Yet after months of growing criticism and short-lived protests, some resolved by individual deals or government appointments, the unrest has unexpectedly galvanized an extraordinary cross-section of Afghan society. While the grievances have yet to coalesce or turn violent, some observers fear a cumulative sense of disillusionment could ignite unexpectedly — perhaps after an especially deadly terrorist attack — and spread.

If there is a common denominator, it might best be summed up as “We Feel Left Out.” Once-rival ethnic Uzbek and Tajik leaders from the north have joined forces with senior Hazara leaders from the capital, demanding that Ghani fire his top security aides and provide more patronage to their parties. Tribal elders from Ghani’s ethnic Pashtun group have held protest gatherings in eastern Nangahar and southern Kandahar provinces, complaining that he has neglected their regions while listening only to a small group of advisers from his own clan.

Some members of the younger, educated generation, the group on which Ghani is most counting, have also joined the opposition. Urban and liberal Hazara activists, previously organized as the “Enlightenment” movement to demand an electrification corridor through their impoverished heartland, became embittered and adrift after a [terrorist bombing killed 80](#) of their supporters at a peaceful rally in Kabul a year ago.

Now, they have found common cause with a movement called “Uprising for Change,” a mix of civic activists and academics that arose spontaneously after a devastating truck bomb exploded in the capital on May 31, killing 150 people and injuring another 400. The attack was [followed](#)

by protests and funeral bombings that left another 28 people dead. Enraged, the uprisers demonstrated for weeks, with people erecting tents on city streets and delivering anti-government speeches.

“We are different from the warlords. We want hospitals and medicines; they want the ministry of health. We want roads and light; they want the ministry of public works,” said Daoud Naji, an Enlightenment leader in Kabul. He said he has become disillusioned as Ghani’s government failed to bring jobs, curb corruption and develop democratic institutions. “We do not believe in violence, but we are turning from good boys into bad boys,” Naji said. “We will run, shout, break windows and break the law, until they listen to us.”

Ghani’s aides say he is well aware of the trouble swirling outside his palace, and in far-flung provinces, but does not view it as a reason to panic or change course. He has responded directly to some demands for change, replacing the [ministers of defense and interior](#) after devastating insurgent attacks, and appointing officials from ethnic minorities to important posts. He has also held televised public meetings, inviting groups to express their concerns and offering them explanations or solutions.

Meanwhile, they said, the president is determined to resist pressure from rent-seeking politicians and stay focused on the financial, justice and administrative [reform agenda](#) that has brought him kudos from Afghanistan’s foreign backers — which pay for 70 percent of the national budget — and from groups like the International Monetary Fund.

But most Afghans have seen little benefit from the reforms. Unemployment is close to 40 percent, and street corners are crammed with day laborers. High-profile efforts to prosecute corrupt officials have been slow, and powerful figures with murky fortunes have built mansions and shopping malls. Street crime and insurgency have infected daily life with the constant fear of violence; last year more than [11,000 civilians](#) were killed or injured in war-related incidents.