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Karzai's team clash over relations with US

By Qais Azimy and Mujib Mashal

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In presence of western officials, Afghan president's chief of staff and senior diplomat accused each other of spying.

Kabul - The increasing influence of a conservative circle within President Hamid Karzai's palace has impeded progress in signing a crucial strategic agreement with the US to chart the relationship beyond 2014,

Their outspoken anti-US views have frustrated Karzai's diplomats negotiating with US officials, often resulting in messy clashes.

On March 8, a day before Afghanistan and the United States signed an agreement to gradually transfer control of prisons to the Afghan government, Jawid Ludin, the deputy foreign minister, and Karim Khurram, Karzai's chief of staff, were summoned to brief Karzai ahead of a video conference with US President Barack Obama. Also in the room were General John Allen, the US commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, and Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador to Kabul.

Just minutes before the call between the two leaders, Karzai left the room for a break, according to three separate sources inside the palace. In the following few minutes, in a confrontation that reportedly verged on physical violence, Khurram and Ludin accused each other of spying - one for Pakistan, the other for the United States. They were split up by the NATO commander and the US ambassador.

Accusations

It all began with a complaint from General Allen, the palace sources said. The US embassy and NATO declined to comment for this article.

General Allen reportedly stated that the prison would be gradually handed over, one of Karzai's pre-conditions to signing a long-term strategic agreement on wider issues. But the Afghan government's media wing must tone down its anti-US rhetoric, Allen insisted.

The Government Media and Information Center (GMIC) falls directly under the authority of Khurram, Karzai's chief of staff.

Ludin, one of Karzai's chief negotiators, turned to Khurram and reiterated the General's point - that such comments hindered negotiations with the US.

Khurram, according to the palace sources, said GMIC was only defending Afghanistan's interests - which Ludin took as an insult.

What Khurram insinuated, an official close to Ludin said, was that the foreign ministry was betraying Afghanistan in negotiations with the US.

Ludin said he would take it upon himself to stop GMIC from making such statements, to which Khurram reportedly responded: "Not even your father can do that."

"You are a spy for the Americans, you do whatever they tell you," Khurram told Ludin at the meeting, according to one official.

Ludin, in return, accused Khurram of spying for Pakistan. At that point, General Allen and Ambassador Crocker are said to have stepped in to prevent a physical confrontation.

Ludin declined to comment for this article. Khurram, after hearing about the premise in person, promised an interview, but then refused to answer his phone.

"Diplomacy was set aside," one senior government official told Al Jazeera about the meeting. "They turned to the Afghan way of arguing."

When Karzai returned to the room, the video-conference went ahead. The prison deal, gradually transferring control to the Afghan government over six months, was signed before the cameras of the world's media the next day, as planned. But the reported confrontation underlines how divided President Karzai's inner court is, with regard to the nature of the long-term relationship with the United States.

Divided palace

"It has been one and half years that the palace has been fractured into two groups," said analyst Abdul Waheed Wafa, the director of the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University.

"On the one side, you have people who say: 'We have not achieved what we want, but we need to stick with the internationals because the alternative is chaos.' Then the other elements - they are against night raids, and against a long-term US and international presence."

The strategic agreement is supposed to provide Afghanistan - a poor country that requires foreign donations for roughly 90 per cent of its annual budget - some assurance to continue its new beginning after decades of war. More importantly, the support of the US would bolster Afghan standing in a volatile region, where the country's neighbours have long been accused of interfering in its internal affairs. For the US, a longer presence in Afghanistan would ensure that it could operate against "threats to US national security", by being able to go after the sanctuaries of those who it believes would use violence against US interests.

But the increasing influence of the conservative chief of staff, and his clashes with what he sees as pro-US elements within Karzai's circle and beyond, has hindered progress to such a point that, in recent weeks, the US announced "it is more important to get the right agreement than to get an agreement". Some interpreted that as the US expressing a decreasing interest in the commitment.

Wafa said the announcement was a bluff that put pressure on the Afghan negotiators, who then compromised, tabling certain preconditions for separate discussions.

"The change of tone in the US was partly to pressure Afghans," said Wafa. "But some Afghans believe it is true - that these people [US officials] are fully frustrated, the US public opinion is against the war, even some senators who were staunch supporters of the war are now saying it is hopeless. That those who wanted an exit got an excuse - that look, the Afghans don't want us, they don't want to sign a long term commitment."

Three issues have been of contention in the negotiating process: US control over Afghan detainees, night raids, and permanent military bases. The two sides agreed to remove the issues of prison transfer and night raids from the strategic agreement, allowing them to be discussed separately.

The prison transfer was signed on March 9, while the memorandum over night raids is being finalised this week, according to an official at the national security council. But the contentious issue of military bases still looms large.

Divisive figure

The argument on March 8 was not just a spur of the moment event. Those views were repeated in subsequent interviews.

"Khurram clearly has an agenda - and he wants to disturb any progress in the relations with the US," an official close to Ludin insisted days after the incident. The other side was no different.

"Absolutely, there are circles that see their sustenance in the West's benefits, and they don't think about the nation," said analyst Ghulam Gilani Zwak, the director of Kabul's Afghan Research

and Consulting Center. "They insist on not negotiating and bargaining, and their actions are slave-like.

"But there are others who have the interest of the nation in mind, who don't want the repeat of what Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Younus Qanooni signed with the US in December 2001, bringing our independence under question."

Zwak was referring to an alleged status of force agreement signed between the US government and representatives of the northern alliance, then a minority group holed up in the north, which helped the US topple the Taliban.

The foreign ministry's dysfunction is much spoken about in Afghanistan. Zalmi Rasul, an aging foreign minister, has been called a passive operator without much foreign policy experience. Ludin, a former spokesman and chief of staff to Karzai, shoulders most of the responsibility in the foreign ministry, where many appointments are allegedly based on kinship.

"Our foreign policy weakness is that we haven't had a stable foreign policy, a clear vision. It's all been reactionary, ad-hoc," said Wafa.

Ahmad Shuja, a Washington-based Afghan analyst, believes the palace repeatedly steps on the toes of the diplomats, making it difficult for them to do their job.

"Karzai's statement, his dynamism, eclipses the efforts of the foreign ministry to set policy. It is diplomacy 'Afghanistan style' - not policy in the conventional sense."

And Khurram's tight grip over the president in the past year has made the job much more difficult for diplomats like Ludin, said analysts.

Frustrations

A controversial former minister of culture, Khurram took over the post of Karzai's chief of staff in early 2011 - a position that has held increasingly more power in the country, particularly under Khurram's predecessor, Omar Dawoodzai.

During his stint as culture minister, Khurram was known as a strict censor of television programmes.

Shuja believes Khurram's seemingly anti-US views stem from two sources.

"His political ideology is shaped by his alignment with Hizb e Islami, and that seems to figure in his calculations," he said. Led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Hizb e Islami began as a political party that fought the Soviets. It played a major role in Afghanistan's bloody civil war in the 1990s, and now is considered the third (and weakest) faction of the anti-US insurgency.

"But also, let's not forget that they have been trying to reach out to the insurgency. Delaying the signing of a strategic pact will help them in appeasing the Taliban," added Shuja.

In purging the GMIC, which is largely funded by the US embassy, the new chief of staff announced his intention to control the government's message. Frustrated with Khurram's control, the US embassy cancelled funding for a brief period and withdrew its advisers from the media group.

Khurram also issued a warning to the president's press staff, ordering them not to allow US advisers in press conferences, one palace official told Al Jazeera.

The US embassy declined to comment for this story. But a US official based in Kabul confirmed the frustrations with the palace.

"For the embassy, it is hard to get any access inside the palace since the chief of staff changed," the official said.

Khurram has at least three private newspapers, a television channel and a radio station under his control, directly or indirectly, one official - who formerly worked for him - said.

"The message is not just an anti-American one, but also divisive internally," said Khurram's former colleague. "His brand of conservative Pashtunism strengthens the notion that all Pashtuns are unilateralist and conservative by nature.

"The president's non-Pashtun allies have been increasingly isolated. The damage that Khurram has inflicted on President Karzai's image in one year - his enemies could not have done the same."