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Hekmatyar's windfall

By Ajai Shukla

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New Delhi - The international media is glossing over a potentially far-reaching development in Afghanistan. There have been a handful of sketchy reports about “armed, popular local uprisings” that have “expelled the Taliban” from several districts in eastern Afghanistan, but there has been little follow-up investigation or writing about these militias. Nobody has asked the difficult questions: how have these militias managed to bloodlessly evict the Taliban, an organisation that holds its own even against US forces? Where have these mysterious militias obtained the rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and even radio sets that they reportedly carry? Village militias, as one Afghanistan watcher who lives in that country pointed out to me, communicate over cell phones, not radios.

Old timers in Afghanistan, including one Parliament member, point out the striking similarities between the current reports about “popular uprisings” and the glowing reports in 1994 that accompanied the emergence of the Taliban. The media of that time had painted the Taliban as a vehicle of popular resistance to a corrupt and brutal established order that set up random checkpoints to extort money; rape womenfolk; and abduct young boys for “bacha baazi”, the chilling Afghan phrase for the systemic sexual exploitation of young boys. Given the similar tone of the current reports (except that the Taliban is now in the role of brutal status quo), it is important to ask: what is this new militia? Is another Frankenstein’s monster being spawned?

Many people with their ears close to the ground in Afghanistan are certain that the US is creating and financing these “popular uprisings”. According to these observers, the US establishment has realised – especially after the wave of “green-on-blue” fratricidal killings, in which 40 Nato soldiers have been shot this year by their Afghan counterparts – that the Afghan National

Security Force (ANSF) remains untrained, unmotivated and infiltrated by the Taliban; it cannot establish security all across Afghanistan. And so the CIA and the US military command in Afghanistan, with the blessings of President Hamid Karzai, have embraced a simple logic: create more power centres that can be controlled; that will leave less space for the recalcitrant Taliban.

The US-backed “popular militia” behind the anti-Taliban uprisings appears to be structured around the Hezb-e-Islami, the mujahideen faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pashtun warlord who was, for many years, Pakistan’s poodle in Afghanistan. Over this last year, Mr Hekmatyar reportedly made several trips to Kabul to negotiate with Mr Karzai. Now he has hitched his wagon to the US and to Mr Karzai, in contrast to the two Taliban factions – Mullah Omar’s Quetta Shoora, and the Haqqani network – which have scornfully rejected talks. Mr Hekmatyar’s party, the Hezb-e-Islami, has the advantage of an overground presence as well. It contested the last elections and has a significant presence in Parliament and in Mr Karzai’s Cabinet. Mr Hekmatyar denies any links with the overground Hezb-e-Islami, but most insiders take that with a pinch of salt.

The National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan’s premier intelligence agency that co-operates closely with the CIA (and, incidentally, with Indian intelligence as well), now controls Mr Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami, say many informed Afghans. Making the linkages clearer, Assadullah Khalid, the NDS chief, has claimed credit for five of the recent “popular uprisings” in which local people drove out the Taliban. It seems evident that the Hezb-e-Islami has struck a bargain with the NDS, gaining the space and CIA-Pentagon resources to establish control over Mr Hekmatyar’s traditional domain: the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Ghazni, Nooristan, Laghman, Badghis and Logar. While Mr Hekmatyar is nobody’s favourite friend, handing him the areas around Kabul would create a buffer against the Taliban, preventing that group from becoming strong enough to sweep into the capital like it did in 1996.

This project to weaken the Taliban is also evident in the emergence of a new militia, the Arbakai, that is challenging the Taliban around Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan. It is hardly a coincidence that this is Mr Hekmatyar’s home province. The Arbakai, most locals around Kunduz agree, obtains arms and funding from the US forces.

If fragmenting control of Afghanistan is the new US game plan, what could the post-2014 landscape look like in that country? Mullah Omar’s Quetta Shoora cannot be blocked from establishing control over southern Afghanistan: the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Farah, Nimroz and Uruzgan. Meanwhile, the Afghan grapevine is abuzz with the news that Mr Karzai has struck a deal with the Haqqani network, ceded the three eastern border provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika, in exchange for a Haqqani undertaking to co-exist with Kabul (The genesis of this deal, masterminded by the Pakistan Army, was described in Broadsword, August 21, 2012, “General Kayani’s dilemma”).

Simultaneously, a pro-Karzai, pro-US, Mr Hekmatyar-controlled militia would establish control over the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Logar, Ghazni, Wardak, Parwan, Kapisa, Laghman and Kunar; and selected areas in the north around Kunduz. The rest of Afghanistan would be controlled by former Northern Alliance leaders, acting in concert or individually. At the centre of this web would be Hamid Karzai, in Kabul, balancing power and playing one off against the

other.

For all those (like this columnist) who have argued for recreating in Afghanistan its historically federalised structure, such an arrangement would seem more workable than the western daydream of a highly centralised liberal democracy, held together by a national army. But this delicately balanced house of cards would have many jokers — none more dangerous than Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In recent Afghan history nobody, with the possible exception of Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, has stabbed more contemporaries in the back. Indian analysts reflexively regard any development that hurts the Taliban as a positive one. Mr Hekmatyar could be the exception.