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On outskirts of Kabul, 'Warlordistan' may be glimpse of Afghan future

Heat Druzeb

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Just down the road from NATO's Camp Warehouse, on the outskirts of Kabul, is a town residents say represents everything the international military coalition has been fighting for more than a decade: A little slice of Warlordistan, where the central government has little power, mafia bosses grab land at will, and armed militias enforce the law — often harshly.

On Pul-e-Charki's gritty, dust-blown main road, 10 miles east of the Presidential Palace, plainclothes gunmen roam its chaotic market. Ubiquitous white pickups with militiamen manning machine guns cruise menacingly. Militiamen said to be loyal to two warlords, who are also members of Afghanistan's national parliament, control parts of four districts, an area that includes the Afghan military's main training center.

Violence is frequent, and arguments with the wrong people can turn deadly in a hurry. It's a situation reminiscent of the dark days of civil war and, many fear, a window into the future.

'They have the guns'

When the names of the two most powerful men in Kabul's eastern suburbs are spoken, the conversation takes on a hushed tone.

Allah Gul Mujahid and Mullah Tarakhel Mohammadi are the undisputed kings of these Kabul suburbs. Residents estimate they each have 500 gunmen loyal to them and when their men start shooting, police rarely intervene; few are brave enough to complain publicly.

“No one can oppose them because they have the guns and you have nothing,” said a local businessman.

Like nearly everyone else interviewed for this story, the businessman was unwilling to allow his name to be used.

“If you say anything against them,” he said, “they will send someone to kill you.”

Mohammadi, known by many as “Crazy Tarakhel,” served in the Taliban government before renouncing them to join the coalition-backed government after the invasion of 2001. He was elected to parliament in 2005 and during the presidential election in 2009, was accused of massive ballot-stuffing for President Hamid Karzai. Gul was a mujahedeen commander during the Soviet invasion and was elected to parliament in 2010.

Men loyal to both have been implicated in crimes ranging from kidnappings to murder.

“He’s a murderer, he’s a thief and he has two more years of ruling out there,” one high-ranking police commander said of Gul, saying he hopes the people will choose a new member of parliament when Gul’s term is up.

Gul and Mohammadi have steadfastly denied the accusations.

“We reject them,” Mohammadi’s legal adviser, who goes by Dr. Hezbollah, said of the accusations. “It’s out of step with reality.”

Gul blamed political rivalries for the claims against him.

“These claims are completely without foundation,” he said. “There are people who are having problems with us and they are spreading negative propaganda.”

He denied arming a militia, though he did not deny there were many armed men loyal to him.

“I was a former jihadi commander against the Russians and most those people were my men at that time but I haven’t given any weapons to them,” he said. “Everyone in Afghanistan has a gun — an Afghan looks nice with a turban, a beard, a mustache and a gun.”

Mohammadi received unwanted press in July when a health clinic in Pul-e-Charki came under heavy automatic weapons and machine gun fire after police and multiple witnesses say one of Mohammadi militiamen became angry that he could not cut in line to see a doctor.

During the rampage, which was caught on video and did serious damage to the clinic, witnesses say a 14-year-old boy was shot in the arm and another victim injured by shrapnel. Windows and glass medicine cabinets were shattered, supplies destroyed and the compound walls pockmarked with bullet holes. Incredibly, local police blocked the road but did not respond and no one filed a formal complaint.

A district government official shrugged his shoulders when asked why no one sought to punish the perpetrators.

“To whom should I complain? The police are doing the same thing (as the militiamen),” he said. “Our hopes for the government are completely broken.”

Return to bloody past?

Residents said the biggest problem is the duo’s penchant for stealing land from the government and private citizens and selling it off (also the scheme most see as the main wealth generator for the men). It’s difficult to travel more than a couple hundred yards without running into a plot of land locals say belongs to Gul or Mohammadi, both of whom deny they deal in real estate.

“Which land? Where? How can we do that?” Gul said. “If you steal money you can hide it but you can’t hide the land.”

Sharifullah Kamawal, a member of parliament from Kabul, confirmed there is a major problem with land grabs and urged people to stand up for their rights, though he was careful not to utter the names of either Gul or Mohammadi.

“I went there and we have seen the lands that have been grabbed — both government and privately owned — and in some places we have seen Afghan National Army soldiers out there protecting it,” he said. “We know there are high-level government officials involved and millions of dollars were paid in bribes to get the land ... If these things are happening a few kilometers from the presidential palace, what is happening in the provinces?”

If armed militias roaming the outskirts of the capital sounds like Afghanistan’s bloody civil war in the early 1990s, when thousands were killed in Kabul by shell and bullets after the Soviet Army pulled out, the similarities are not lost on local authorities and the residents of Kabul province’s Wild East.

“It’s a big threat to the future because if they are not disarmed now, in Kabul there will be fighting again, street to street,” the police commander said.

He lamented that U.S. and international forces haven’t stepped in, and looks to 2014, the year all international combat troops are scheduled to leave Afghanistan, with trepidation.

“With the withdrawal of American forces there will be a lot of bloodshed in Kabul,” he said, “and all of the progress we made in the past 10 years will be ruined.”