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From Discontent to Violence at Kabul College

By ROD NORDLAND

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- The student, a social sciences major named Abdul Basir, was in the middle of giving an interview on Monday about why he did not want his university renamed.

"We don't want politics at the university," he said, speaking softly, in conciliatory tones. "It should not be named after a political figure."

Suddenly Mr. Basir was punched in the face by someone who disagreed, and yet another melee was under way on Monday between rival groups over the decision by President Hamid Karzai to change the name of Kabul Education University to The Martyr of Peace Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani University.

Many students would go much further than Mr. Basir, saying that while Mr. Rabbani was indeed a martyr, he was only dubiously a man of peace, and his only connection to the university was rocketing it during the civil war.

More than two weeks of peaceful protests over the renaming have all but shut down the university, a teacher-training institution with 7,000 students, the second-largest college in Kabul. "Seventeen days of peaceful protests, that's a record in Afghanistan," said one of the student leaders, Aziz Rahman.

On Monday, though, things turned violent, as supporters of the name change -- mostly not from the school itself -- converged on the protesters, who numbered a few hundred, pummeling them with stones and running them off from outside the campus gates.

Ten policemen were injured attempting to restore order, and numerous students were arrested -- mostly among the anti-Rabbani crowd. Plainclothes officers confiscated brass knuckles and knives from one side or another. Police trucks could be seen bringing some of the counterprotesters to the rally from places like the Shomali plain, an area north of Kabul that is a stronghold of supporters of the Mr. Rabbani, who was killed last year.

In the midst of all the tumult, a phone rang in the pocket of the school's chancellor, Amanullah Hamidzai, who was on the campus grounds, surrounded by more police than there had ever been protesters. It was, he said, President Karzai on the line.

"He told me be careful with the students, be gentle with them," Mr. Hamidzai said. "Imagine, the president calling me. He is very concerned about this."

The Afghan president's options are limited, however, having publicly vowed in a recent speech not to rescind the name change out of respect for Mr. Rabbani's memory. His own government includes Rabbani allies in powerful positions.

Burhanuddin Rabbani was the leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami party, an ethnic Tajik-centered group that fought against the Taliban, against the Soviets and later against other factions during the civil war in the 1990s. Human Rights Watch said in a 2005 report that he should be investigated for atrocities committed "including intentional killing of civilians, beating of civilians, abductions based on ethnicity, looting and forced labor."

Mr. Rabbani had also briefly served as president of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, and peacefully handed over power to Mr. Karzai in 2001. Pashtuns, mostly from the south and east, are the most numerous ethnic group in Afghanistan, and as a Pashtun, Mr. Karzai was seen as a less divisive figure than a northerner like Mr. Rabbani would be. Most Taliban are Pashtuns, as well.

Mr. Karzai later appointed Mr. Rabbani as head of the High Peace Council, a body charged with seeking reconciliation with the Taliban -- apparently to allay fears by northerners of a peace deal between Pashtuns that would leave them out. Last year, a man posing as a Taliban peace emissary turned out to be a suicide bomber with explosives in his turban, and he killed Mr. Rabbani.

To commemorate the Sept. 21 anniversary of Mr. Rabbani's death, by presidential decree a major street in Kabul and the airport in Kandahar were named after the slain Tajik leader, and the Kabul Education University was re-christened Rabbani University.

The protests began immediately. Like so much here, they had a clear ethnic coloration, with Pashtun and Hazara students in the forefront, and their opponents -- many of them not students -- mostly Tajiks.

"Rabbani deserves this," said Sayid Bahramudin, a Tajik from Baghlan, who said he was a student at "Kabul Education University," momentarily forgetting the new name he had come to the street to defend. "He sacrificed for peace to bring peace." The protesters, he said, "are all outsiders and terrorists."

Mr. Rahman, the student leader, who is a Pashtun literature major, had a starkly different take. "Mr. Rabbani was the one who was firing rockets at this university during the civil war. How can they name it after him?" The university was then called the Institute of Pedagogy, and was a base for ethnic Hazara fighters.

Another student protester, Zmarai Kochi, said there were strong practical objections to the name change. "Can you imagine if you had an identity card with this name on it and you were caught in Wardak Province?" he said, referring to a heavily Pashtun area. "You would be killed for it."

Other students complained that in perhaps two-thirds of the country a diploma from Rabbani University would make it impossible to get a job, in a country where trained teachers are in desperately short supply everywhere.

Mr. Hamidzai, the school chancellor, said he "abstains" from giving a view on the new name, although he did note that Mr. Rabbani had never set foot on the university campus.

He said that the president had proposed a compromise that would allow all four class years now at the school to get their diplomas and other documents in the old name. "It's a good compromise," he said.

Student leaders rejected the compromise and vowed to return to the streets on Tuesday. "We are not fighting for ourselves," Mr. Rahman said. "We are fighting for the future of our university and of Afghanistan."