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## Killers of Khwaja wanted custody of Afghan Taliban, not release

By Amir Mir  
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The Asian Tigers' demand for the release of some key commanders of the Afghan Taliban, including Mulla Omar's second-in-command, in exchange for the freedom of two abducted former ISI officials, was apparently motivated by the hate factor and designed to get their custody from the Pakistan government, instead of ensuring their release.

According to the Pakistani authorities investigating the March 26 abduction and the April 30 murder of Khalid Khwaja, his abductors were somehow convinced that the former intelligence official had been working against the interests of the Punjabi Taliban since 2007 and spying for the Pakistani and American intelligence agencies.

His abductors believed that Khwaja was responsible for the deaths of dozens of their fellow Punjabi Taliban fighters belonging to the Harkatul Jihadul Islami (HUJI), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who were killed during the July 2007 Operation Silence carried out by the Pakistan Army against the Lal Masjid clerics. The Punjabi Taliban belonging to several Sunni Deobandi sectarian-cum-Jihadi groups which are working in tandem with the Pashtun-dominated Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, further used to despise Khalid Khwaja for his support to the Afghan Taliban and opposition to the Pakistani Taliban.

Muhammad Omar, a spokesman for Taliban Media Centre being operated by the Punjabi Taliban, has already been quoted by the media as saying that Khwaja was executed because he used to call the Punjabi Taliban terrorists and refer to the Afghan Taliban as Mujahideen. However, the family members of the slain ISI officer say Khwaja was opposed to only those elements in the Pakistani Jihadi organisations which had let loose a reign of terror across

Pakistan through bloody suicide bombings, which would kill innocent civilians. Yet those investigating Khawaja's murder pointed out, despite their disgust for the Afghan Taliban, which has already been expressed by the spokesman of the Punjabi Taliban, Omar, the fact remains that the Asian Tigers had demanded the release of some key commanders of the Afghan Taliban (currently in the custody of the Pakistani authorities), including Mulla Abdul Ghani Baradar, in return for the release of Khalid Khwaja, Colonel Sultan Tarar alias Colonel Imam and a British journalist of Pakistani origin, Asad Qureshi.

The Pakistani authorities are of the view that the Asian Tigers' demand was not meant to ensure freedom for the Afghan Taliban commanders but they actually wanted their custody. Since the beginning of February 2010, Pakistani authorities have captured 10 of the 18-member Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), including Mulla Abdul Ghani Baradar, the second-in-command of Mulla Mohammad Omar, Motasim Agha Jan, the son-in-law of Mulla Mohammad Omar and at least half-a-dozen shadow governors of the Afghan provinces. These high-profile arrests, combined with the ongoing US-led military offensive in Helmand and the unending spate of American drone attacks in the tribal areas of Pakistan, have adversely damaged the command and control structure of the Afghan Taliban, which is called the Quetta Shura Taliban.

Khalid Khwaja's affection for the detained commanders of the Afghan Taliban can be gauged from the fact that he had filed a petition with the Lahore High Court on February 26, 2010, seeking court orders to stop the federal and the Punjab governments from handing over the arrested Afghan Taliban leaders to the US or any other country till further orders. The petitioner contended that the Afghan Taliban leaders were Muslims and arrested from Pakistan, therefore, they should be prosecuted inside Pakistan instead of handing them over to the US. And the LHC Chief Justice Khawaja Sharif had subsequently restrained the federal and the Punjab governments from handing them over to any other country.

Following the March 26 abduction of Khalid Khwaja and his two companions, one of the major demands put forth by the Punjabi Taliban was an immediate withdrawal of Khwaja's petition from the LHC. Subsequently, on April 26, hardly 72 hours before his execution, Khwaja's lawyer had filed a fresh application in the LHC, seeking withdrawal of all the pending cases in the court against the possible extradition of 10 arrested Afghan Taliban to the United States, but without mentioning any reason.

Later, appearing in the chamber of Chief Justice Khawaja Sharif, Khwaja's lawyer Tariq Asad sought adjournment of the hearing on the application till May 4, saying he is waiting for final 'instructions' from the petitioner for withdrawal of the cases. He reportedly told the CJ that Khawaja was in the custody of Taliban for the last one-month and they are asking for withdrawing the cases. The chief justice subsequently postponed the case hearing till May 4. The Asian Tigers had actually fixed Saturday (May 1) as the final deadline for the government to fulfil their demands but decided to execute Khwaja 24 hours before the expiry of the time limit due to unknown reasons.

Explaining their decision to execute Khawaja, Muhammad Omar, the spokesman for the Punjabi Taliban, has said that all major militant organisations operating in the Waziristan region

unanimously agreed to punish him and everybody wanted him to be executed as he had confessed to all the charges levelled against him.