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Ethnic divide threatens in Afghanistan

Memories of a devastating civil war along ethnic lines have been heightened and fears raised by President Hamid Karzai's bid to reach out to the largely Pashtun Taliban.

By Laura King

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Reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan

The sunbaked, shell-pocked ruins of west Kabul stand as silent testament to what happened the last time Afghanistan splintered along ethnic lines.

The country's disastrous civil war in the early 1990s — a conflict that killed at least 100,000 people and helped set the stage for the Taliban's rise to power — reduced whole swaths of the capital to rubble, leaving scars on the landscape that reconstruction efforts have yet to erase.

Memories linger too — stirred, these days, by steadily rising ethnic tensions amid President Hamid Karzai's bid to reach out to the Taliban.

Unconvinced of the United States' staying power in Afghanistan, Karzai is seeking a rapprochement with the Taliban movement, with the ultimate goal of drawing it into the political process. But his overtures have raised alarm among those who fear such a result could realign power along ethnic lines.

The Taliban movement is drawn almost solely from Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns. And leaders of the country's other significant minorities — Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras — are worried they may be left out in the cold as Karzai moves to woo insurgents and consolidate his base of support among fellow Pashtuns.

"I think Karzai feels that his power is not 100% stable anymore, and for that reason, he needs to reach out to the armed opposition," said lawmaker Shukria Barakzai. "That seems to be the motivation."

It is a change in strategy for the Afghan leader who, last summer, sought reelection by trying to forge alliances across the ethnic spectrum. But massive election fraud tainted his victory, and in his weakened state, he has found himself unable to deliver on campaign promises.

Some of those allies are now distancing themselves — or breaking outright with the Afghan leader. This month, the influential Hazara politician Haji Mohammed Mukhaqiq, a onetime backer, delivered a blistering condemnation of Karzai at a rally, calling his presidency illegitimate.

Mukhaqiq's immediate ire was raised by Karzai's inability to push through the confirmation of two Hazara Cabinet nominees. But Hazaras, who were the target of communal massacres during the Taliban's reign, have for months listened with alarm to the president's increasingly conciliatory references to the Taliban as "disaffected brothers."

The Afghan leader has promised to seek talks only with insurgent figures who renounce violence, reject ties to groups such as Al Qaeda and pledge to respect the Afghan Constitution and its enshrinement of principles such as the rights of women.

But Western diplomats question whether those tenets are enforceable in the type of back-channel contacts that have been taking place for at least a year, and it is widely recognized that a Western troop drawdown will probably hinge on movement toward some kind of political settlement with the Taliban.

American influence over Karzai's actions has been weakened by a perception that the U.S.-led military effort is floundering, as exemplified by delays in a much-vaunted effort to reassert government authority in the key southern city of Kandahar, and the abrupt change in command of North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces.

Amid a growing sense of a power structure in flux, ethnic politics have moved to the fore. One pointed recent example was Karzai's ouster of intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, who was well regarded by the West. Saleh, an ethnic Tajik, had voiced serious qualms about Karzai's courting of the Taliban with measures such as releases of jailed Taliban suspects, a plan that won the endorsement of a peace jirga, or assembly, convened last month.

Those prisoner releases, which have begun, horrified many in Afghanistan's security establishment, who believed that Karzai was granting the insurgents a major concession while getting nothing in return. Moreover, some of those who have walked out the prison gates, or are slated to do so soon, were captured at considerable risk to the lives of Afghan and coalition forces.

Another leading critic of Karzai's reconciliation strategy is Abdullah Abdullah, the former foreign minister who is now the informal leader of the opposition. Abdullah, the second-place vote-getter in August's polling, qualified for a runoff with Karzai, but quit the race in disgust, declaring there was no way the presidential balloting could be conducted fairly.

On Karzai's recent visits to Kandahar, his home province, the president's references to the Taliban had gone well beyond the fraternal, Abdullah said.

"It's not just the language he has used for months about 'disaffected brothers'; now he says, 'Talib-jan,' which is like calling them 'darling,'" said Abdullah, who is half-Pashtun but has a primarily Tajik political identity. "To me, it shows the lack of a sense of direction and vision."

Just as the Karzai-Abdullah election struggle had ethnic overtones, tensions may reemerge with the current campaign for parliamentary elections, which are to be held in September. This month, an oversight body ejected 31 candidates from the races because of ties to armed groups.

Some, like Pashtun lawmaker Daoud Sultanzoy, believe ethnic-based electioneering is a cynical ploy by power brokers eager to exploit divisions to claim a share of patronage spoils for themselves.

"Much of the time, ordinary Afghans from different groups, different tribes, can get along, because there is a sense of commonality in the hardship of their lives," Sultanzoy said. "But there is what I call a 'merchant class' of politicians who want to fan the ethnic fires for their own benefit."

Ethnic rivalries are mirrored too in the ranks of the country's armed forces, which are crucial to Western hopes that Afghanistan can one day assume responsibility for its own security and foreign troops can withdraw.

The Afghan army's officer corps is dominated by Tajiks, who made up the core of the Northern Alliance, the U.S.-allied group that helped bring down the Taliban — and to this day are deeply mistrustful of Pakistan, whose intelligence service helped create and nurture the Taliban movement.

Many see the hand of Pakistan in Karzai's efforts to bring the Taliban to the bargaining table, and believe the Islamabad government is meddling in policy decisions, such as

Karzai's removing of Saleh, the intelligence chief, who was a harsh critic of Pakistani ties to insurgent figures.

The wariness is particularly pronounced among non-Pashtuns, who fear that Pakistan will try to broker a peace deal with the Taliban that will guarantee its own continuing influence and counter that of India.

"Mr. Karzai has been unable to reduce Pakistani interference, and now it seems he welcomes it," said lawmaker Fazal Karim Aymaq, a member of the minority Aymaq ethnic group in northern Afghanistan. "So once again we will see Afghanistan used as a pawn."