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Pessimism Fills Kabul During Mourning for Slain Peace Council Chief

By Alissa J. Rubin

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President Hamid Karzai landed at Kabul International Airport as dusk fell here Wednesday and faced a country even more fearful and divided than the one he had left just three days ago.

The assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of the country's High Peace Council, on Tuesday by a supposed emissary from the Taliban was still reverberating through the country. His death raised disturbing questions about who was responsible and, if it was the Taliban, whether the insurgents had any interest in pursuing peace with an American-backed government.

By Wednesday it was apparent that the killing threatened to splinter the already fragile alliances between Afghanistan's ethnic groups, leaving a sense of desolation about the country's future.

No one lost more politically when Mr. Rabbani died than Mr. Karzai, several analysts said. Mr. Karzai is a Pashtun from Kandahar, in the south, while Mr. Rabbani was a former president and onetime leader of the Northern Alliance, the anti-Taliban force made up mostly of ethnic Tajiks.

While Mr. Rabbani's efforts at peace had shown only limited promise, his backing of Mr. Karzai had shored up the president, who was under constant pressure from former members of the Northern Alliance not to sell out to the Taliban, who are also mostly southern Pashtuns like the

president.

In standing shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Karzai, Mr. Rabbani blunted the sharpest criticism from the northerners and lent a patina of credibility to Mr. Karzai's often naïve sounding efforts to reach out to the Taliban. Mr. Karzai has often spoken of the Taliban as alienated "brothers," glossing over their killing of civilians and the string of assassinations that have killed even close allies of the president.

"President Rabbani brought a notable dimension of stability and so that's why he was very important and his assassination left a vacuum in the north," said Haroun Mir, a political analyst in Kabul.

The northern powerbrokers are both inside and outside the government and include the governor of Balkh Province, Atta Mohammed Noor; the minister of interior, Bismullah Khan; as well as former presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah. Some have delivered barely veiled broadsides against Mr. Karzai. However in Mr. Rabbani's presence they deferred.

"Now who represents the north? Now that President Rabbani is not here, the critics of President Karzai will gain prominence in the North," Mr. Mir said.

The other casualty is the peace process itself. While no one is declaring it dead, with Mr. Rabbani's it cannot go forward in anything like the form it was in. First off a new chairman must be found for the peace council, and finding someone who holds the same national stature as Mr. Rabbani and can command the same respect from an array of groups will not be easy.

Trickier is to set up new rules that will at once safeguard council members from being killed and ensure that they are not duped by imposters, but still leave them accessible to insurgents who are thinking of changing sides.

Security for the peace process has been troubled from the start, and there have been repeated efforts to derail it. In the summer of 2010 when the Consultative Jirga was held in Kabul, which resulted in the formation of the council, insurgents attacked the event, shooting multiple rockets at it. Mr. Karzai, infuriated at the breach in security, fired his minister of interior and his head of national intelligence. Subsequently it emerged that Pakistani authorities had pressed for their removal.

A few months later, a man posing as a senior Taliban leader engaged in talks with NATO officials and even went to the presidential palace, getting gifts of money along the way, only to turn out to be an imposter — a shopkeeper in Quetta, Pakistan. This time, the emissary from the enemy turned out to be a saboteur.

The Northern Alliance is unequivocal that the approach has to change. Although what that means is open to interpretation, there was not a good word from the north for Mr. Karzai. Some said overtures to the Taliban needed to end altogether. Others said many more safeguards needed to be put in place.

“We can’t make peace with Taliban from a position of weakness,” said Ahmad Wali Massoud, the brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the jihadi leader killed on the eve of the attack on the World Trade Center. He spoke just outside the mourning tent hastily set up on Wednesday to accommodate the crowds of supporters of Mr. Rabbani who gathered at his house to offer condolences.

“The responsibility for this attack goes to this government. Because if they cannot differentiate between two people — which one is Taliban and which one is not — how can they negotiate with a big movement like the Taliban.”

Others were angrier and suggested giving up on achieving any rapprochement with any Taliban.

“We have reached the conclusion that Taliban can’t be one side of a dialogue and peace deal,” said Sultan Mohammad Awrang, a former member of Parliament and a member of Jamiat, the party started by Mr. Rabbani. “They don’t have that independence; they are just tools and outsiders who control them. So we can not get anywhere in this process.” The term outsiders generally refers to the Pakistanis.

More moderate voices were still to be found, but they seemed faint, not least because of the unanswered questions that loomed. A day later much about the assassination remained mysterious. No one seemed to know anything about the man who killed Mr. Rabbani, beyond his name, which by the end of the day everyone agreed was Esmatullah Kandahari.

Questions abounded about how a man carrying a bomb could have entered the home of a high-ranking figure like Mr. Rabbani without apparently either a background check or a thorough search.

“How can it be that they would let someone in to see the man in charge of bringing peace to Afghanistan without knowing who he is?” said an Afghan consultant, who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to speak about the issue.

Mr. Karzai also seemed at a loss for words. As soon as he arrived, he went straight to the military hospital where Mr. Rabbani’s body was being kept until his burial on Friday and made no public statement.

Reporting was contributed by Jack Healy, Abdul Waheed Wafa and Sangar Rahimi from Kabul, and Taimoor Shah from Kandahar, Afghanistan.