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Deconstructing the death of Rabbani

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Afghans invariably had a twinkle in their eye when the "Ustad" came up in conversation. It was mirthful and respectful, it spoke of familiarity bordering on affection for a patriarch who was capable of frailties. Burhanuddin Rabbani was incomparable in the pantheon of Afghanistan's jihadi heroes.

Rabbani, 71, former president and head of the Afghan Peace Council, was assassinated in his Kabul home by a suicide bomber on September 20.

Rabbani evoked respect as an Islamic scholar, while his jihadi pedigree was impeccable. He was admired for the ease with which he criss-crossed Afghanistan's political and ethnic divides although he remained the tallest Tajik leader. Rabbani could be ruthless, but then, he was also incapable of guile and animosities. He amused onlookers with his vanities and his weakness for pomp and flattery.

But he was feared for his political skills and could also be fickle-minded to the point of being unreliable. Above all, he was widely respected as an Afghan nationalist.

Rabbani was a man of many parts. Unlike his Jamiat e-Islami (Islamic Society of Afghanistan) commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who remained in Panjshir through the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, Rabbani was based in Pakistan and was one of the "Peshawar Seven" during the jihad of

the 1980s against the Soviets. This necessitated, or enabled, him to forge a close working relationship with Pakistan's military and security establishment.

This was so much so that when bitter rivalries over the leadership of the mujahideen government in Kabul erupted in early-1992, then-Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif anointed him as "interim president".

However, Rabbani became so accustomed to the presidency that he wouldn't vacate it as he had earlier vowed to do, and Islamabad tried all the tricks in its bag but couldn't dethrone him. Unsurprisingly, some bitterness followed when the Taliban forcefully drove him out of Kabul and seized power in 1996.

But a cordial relationship resumed nonetheless when after a lap of absence he visited Islamabad in his new capacity with the High Peace Council (entrusted with the mission to reconcile the Taliban). Pakistan's army chief Parvez Kiani hosted him in General headquarters in Rawalpindi as a mark of honor to someone, who, despite the ebb and flow of time, remained a familiar figure, after all.

Karzai is the 'loser'

Any attempt to deconstruct Rabbani's assassination should begin with a detached look at the bonds between him and Pakistan's military leadership. No doubt, it was a complex relationship, enriched by Rabbani's networking with the "Islamic" parties in Pakistan and the various jihadi elements in the region and beyond as well as with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Conceivably, Kiani saw Rabbani (an ethnic Tajik) as a potential interlocutor who could help Pakistan reach out to the non-Pashtuns, especially the Panjshiris. Rabbani had complicated equations with Massoud and the Panjshiris, and there were acute moments when the two sides barely tolerated each other.

What helped was that without Rabbani as figure-head, the Shura-e-Nazar - the supervisory council created by Massoud in 1984 that comprised about 130 commanders from 12 northern, eastern and central regions of Afghanistan - would have remained provincial. Massoud needed Rabbani politically, and the Ustad lacked military skills while the commander made up for it.

Again, his excellent ties with Iran, his sagacity to keep lines open to the Taliban, his virulent "anti-Americanism" - these were also of interest to Pakistan, whose military leadership showed pragmatism by accepting him as the point person in intra-Afghan dialogue. Pakistan assessed that if any non-Pashtun leader had a chance of bringing the Northern Alliance groups on board the reconciliation process and a broad-based settlement, it was Rabbani.

Suffice to say, the repercussions of Rabbani's assassination for Pakistan could be serious. One, the hawkish Panjshiris and other intransigent Northern Alliance groups will use Rabbani's death to block any accommodation with the Taliban, which indeed would mean a disastrous slide toward civil war.

Two, against the backdrop of the US-Pakistan standoff, an axis might develop at some point between these intransigent Northern Alliance elements and the United States on the basis of a congruence of interests. (The Northern Alliance suggested such an alliance in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.)

Equally, a polarization would further isolate President Hamid Karzai. The US agenda to corner Karzai receives a fillip in these changed circumstances. The deck gets cleared now for the US to mop up residual issues relating to the strategic agreement that it is keen to conclude before a peace conference begins in Berlin in December.

With the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance groups in rebellious mood, Karzai will have a hard time carrying forward the dialogue with the Taliban. He cannot easily find a replacement for Rabbani. The credibility of the High Peace Council was never really high, and it is literally in tatters today.

Besides, Karzai needs to focus on his own political survival as his isolation after the murder of his half-brother Wali Karzai becomes acute. His opponents in parliament challenge his constitutional authority; the government's functioning has suffered and the president is unable to get his cabinet posts filled.

On the other hand, he is pilloried for being "ineffectual" and an impression has been created that while he remains in office, the drawdown of US troops is hard to implement on the ground. It is actually more than a blame game.

The 'unknown unknown'

The US prefers to directly handle the reconciliation process with the Taliban and set its terms, without involving Karzai (or Pakistan). Surely, the biggest gain for the US from Rabbani's departure is that the idea of the "Afghan-owned" peace process that Karzai spearheaded (which Washington never really favored) has floundered for all practical purposes.

In sum, deconstructing the death of Rabbani produces strange patterns. Those who "gained" include the intransigent Northern Alliance groups and the "alien mercenaries of organized terrorism", as Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad pithily described. What is certain is that Karzai "lost" heavily. He needs to figure out a way forward. Pakistan is pressing him to pick up the threads and resume the joint Afghan-Pakistani peace process.

Some fingers have pointed at Pakistan for being responsible for Rabbani's murder - principally, these are irate Northern Alliance elements ("warlords") who are jostling for political space and are openly courting foreign sponsorship. The US, which is piling the pressure on Pakistan, refrained from linking the ISI with Rabbani's murder - the Taliban have denied involvement.

In Rabbani's last interview - with a Russian television channel - he admitted that he was skating on thin ice. The following excerpts become significant:

I cannot say that [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar has agreed to participate in the peaceful negotiations, or that he has denied this possibility completely ... the Taliban leadership has trends towards peace, and these trends do have a certain power. They realize that the country's security is in their interests as well.

No doubt, presently there are divisions within the Taliban leadership operating in the country as well as beyond ... We understand that there are issues within the movement, and there are certain forces that can cause problems ... Some forces intend to undermine the peaceful process and the negotiations with the Pakistani government.

Certainly, the people of Afghanistan do not want foreign troops to remain ... and we don't want our nation's security to depend upon a foreign military presence. It is unacceptable ... However, considering the critical security situation in our country, the lack of stability and the continuing armed clashes, we have to tolerate the foreign military presence.

We have received assistance as well as certain commitments from the countries of the region, especially Pakistan, and we expect it to start making some practical steps ... The biggest challenge ... is the issue of representation of negotiators and, again, a lot depends upon Pakistan's attitude ... As soon as the government of Pakistan decides that it is time to seriously tackle the issue of peace in Afghanistan and undertake the task of providing their assistance and protection to our country, I'm sure the peace process will be out of the deadlock.

It was a candid interview. Rabbani wasn't sure Mullah Omar was in the peace process, nor was he sure the Taliban supremo was rejecting it - the "unknown unknown", as former US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld would say.

Rabbani said the Afghan people opposed foreign occupation, but he justified the US military presence and sidestepped the reality that the military presence was part of the problem. He hinted there were forces that resented his dealings with Pakistan, but he complained that Pakistan wasn't yet cooperating with the peace process - although it had mastery over the insurgents. Rabbani knew that a shroud of strategic ambiguity was inexorably surrounding him and the peace process.

The intriguing part is where he stood vis-a-vis the US, finally. His "anti-Americanism" was apparently mellowing, but his last port of call was Tehran. He juggled far too many balls in the air, which in today's Afghanistan meant inviting trouble - even for an Ustad.