

Afghan Gloom

Author: [Peter Eichstaedt](#)

Killing of president's brother and Kabul hotel attack are weather vanes pointing to a dark future for Afghanistan.



**Peter
Eichstaedt**
Country
Director, IWPR
Afghanistan

Recent dramatic events – the assassination of Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of Afghan president Hamid Karzai, and the attack on the Intercontinental hotel in Kabul – underscore the increasingly fragile state of Afghanistan.

Both events come in the wake of President Barack Obama's announcement of the three-year drawdown of 100,000 United States troops – that begins this month – and the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in early May.

Proclaiming that Afghanistan's future would be left in the hands of Afghan security forces, Obama implied that the US and international forces had done all they could in the country in the war on terror.

But the capabilities of the Afghan army were questioned when some eight men attacked the Intercontinental hotel, considered one of Kabul's more secure places for internationals and Afghans alike.

The unusual night battle at the hotel continued nearly until dawn, when NATO helicopters were called to eliminate the final three fighters who had taken refuge on the hotel roof.

While many said this showed a weakness in Afghan security, with reports that some guards fled the initial attack rather than fight, the response was about as good as it could have been. Since the hotel sits on a hill, Afghan forces were unable to eliminate the rooftop attackers without aerial support.

Like the attack on the Intercontinental, the killing of President Karzai's brother is another sideshow in the on-going Afghan turmoil, yet also an example of the underlying problems that plague Afghanistan and cast dark clouds over its future.

The attack on the hotel shows the pervasive presence of the Taleban and their growing alliance with other anti-government forces, said to be funded and supported by powerful entities within Afghanistan's neighbours, Pakistan and Iran.

These forces have steadily ratcheted up the size, frequency and drama of these attacks, and they show a frightening ability to penetrate seemingly impenetrable places.

Recent events have included the wholesale escape of nearly 500 Taleban captives from a prison in the southern province of Kandahar ; the dramatic attack on the defence ministry headquarters in Kabul ; and the suicide attack on a high-level military meeting in the northern Taxhar province that killed one of Afghanistan's best commanders and injured a NATO general.

The list grows day by day.

The killing of Wali Karzai by one of his closest bodyguards illustrates Afghanistan's internal turmoil, which is perhaps even more threatening to Afghanistan's future than its external enemies.

While international forces have battled the Taleban and its allies, and spent billions of dollars to train and equip more than 200,000 security forces, many senior officials have steadily enriched themselves.

Among those most often mentioned has been Wali Karzai, 50, said to have muscled his way into the country's multi-billion dollar opium trade, an accusation he has denied. He was said to have controlled lucrative security contracts and conducted vast land grabs as well.

The president's brother controlled most of what happened in the southern province of Kandahar, which he governed as his personal fiefdom .

It was not the first attempt on Wali Karzai's life. There had been three previous ones . And with the highly lucrative opium trade on the upswing and increasingly in the hands of the Taleban, his life was lived on the edge.

A decade of war and chaos in the countryside, coupled with corruption at the country's core, has driven the people of Afghanistan into the arms of the Taleban.

On a recent evening , I sat with an Afghan friend who lives in a province neighbouring Kabul. He confessed that he reluctantly supported the Taleban, which in the past 18 months had taken control of his village.

"Where is it secure?" he asked angrily. War continues as it has since US forces arrived in 2001, and cities are increasingly targeted by suicide bombers, he complained.

International forces no longer patrolled his village. His only hope for the future was to make his peace with the Taleban, which he'd done.

While it was hard to accept, I understood his dilemma and his choice. The international community was leaving, but he would stay, facing an uncertain future.

The killing of President Karzai's brother and the hotel attack are weather vanes pointing to a dark future for Afghanistan. The country is being torn by forces from within and from without.

The sad irony is a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan, which sits in the heart of southern Asia and is one of the most impoverished countries in the world, would benefit the entire region.

Not only would the people of Afghanistan flourish, but so would its neighbours, Pakistan and Iran, and the Central Asian countries to the north.

Instead, the rational has been that control of Afghanistan is best maintained with the barrel of a gun and the threat of a bomb. Nothing will change this in the near future, especially the exodus of international forces.

Peter Eichstaedt is IWPR 's Afghanistan country director.

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