

Karzai in Taleban Storm

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President's backing for certain members of former regime provokes outrage.

A recent speech by Afghanistan's transitional president, in which he defended some former members of the former Taleban regime, has sparked anger and controversy around the country.

President Hamid Karzai made the comments only days after US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited the country on May 1 and declared that "the war against the Taleban is over".

In his May 5 speech to Afghanistan's Ulema (religious scholars) in Kabul, Karzai praised several mullahs and other former Taleban members whom he said turned away when the regime, under the influence of foreigners (from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan), launched its jihad (holy war) against fellow Muslims in Afghanistan.

Those he mentioned by name as being "good Talebs" included Mullah Yar Mohammad, Mullah Rabbani, Mullah Bor jan and Mullah Almadullah.

The most controversial name mentioned in the Karzai speech was that of Mullah Ghaws, currently in exile in Pakistan. A former Taleban foreign minister, he was captured by Northern Alliance forces and placed under house arrest after his release.

In his speech to the Ulema, Karzai said he had invited Mullah Ghaws to meet with him in Kabul.

"I want to say to my nation through this gathering that these Taleban are sons of Afghanistan," said Karzai. "[But] those who became terrorists and divided the country are the enemy, and we will continue to hunt them down."

His remarks sparked an immediate media storm. Abdul Hafeez Mansoor, editor of Payam e Mujahid (The Mujahed Message), described the statement as "treason against Islam, national unity and the wishes of the people".

"[The Taleban] was a movement against Islam, something that is recognised by Islamic scholars around the world as being a movement of criminals and killers," wrote Mansoor, adding that the Ulema rejected the former regime's violations of human rights and opposition to good relations with the rest of the world.

Karzai sought to clarify his remarks at a news conference on May 6. "I do not want ordinary people who were forced to follow the Taleban to now be forced to stay at home in order to avoid harassment," he said.

But the misunderstanding continued, six days later, when 200 angry citizens demonstrated in downtown Kabul waving banners with the slogans, "Taleban Have No Right to Return!" and "We Withdraw Our Support for Karzai".

One woman shouted that women had been deprived of all rights under the previous regime. "We were

locked up in our homes,” she said, “I want national unity for this country, not the Taleban.”

But others argued that Karzai’s speech had been intended to promote national unity. Kabul resident Abdul Saboor told IWPR that he believed the president’s comments were designed to ease tensions, adding, “I think compromise is the only logical way forward.”

Habibulah Rafi, a well-known writer and editor of the independent national news magazine Kalid, interpreted the president’s remarks as an assurance that “from now on, no one should be arrested, jailed or killed just because they were Taleban”.

Culture and information minister Sayad Makhdom Raheen said Karzai’s words were not a defence of the Taleban or al-Qaeda, but a reminder that ordinary people were also caught up in the movement.

A medical student from eastern Nangrahar province, who asked to remain anonymous, said, “Karzai is the leader of the Afghan nation and cannot simply ignore the Taleban. He wants to end factional divisions and invite the Taliban to join the rest of the nation, and that could be useful.”

Faqeer Mohammad, who recently returned to the capital from the western city of Herat, said some of the former regime would have to be allowed back into government for the sake of national unity, “Restoring peace and stability to Afghanistan without reinstating some Taleban figures to government is impossible.”

Despite Karzai’s apparently conciliatory approach to the Taleban, there’s little sign that the former regime is any mood to mend fences with the authorities. Indeed, if anything, the Islamic rebels are stepping up their activities against the regime, no matter what Rumsfeld would have us believe.

They continue to pose a security threat to US and Afghan forces in southeastern Afghanistan, along the border with Pakistan. Last month, Taleban forces killed a Red Cross worker and more recently burned several schools intended for girls in Kandahar, Ghazni and elsewhere.

And there are almost daily attacks on foreign and local aid workers, mine-clearance experts and international soldiers - the most recent being the wounding of two Norwegian members of ISAF, Afghanistan’s international security force, on May 14 in Kabul.

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