

Karzai's Balancing Act

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Following an outbreak of violence in Herat, the Afghan president tries to retain the support of an important warlord.

The recent clash between government forces in the western Afghan city of Herat and troops loyal to the regional governor, Ismail Khan, is the toughest test to date faced by the young administration of President Hamed Karzai.

It highlights the fragile peace that hovers over war-torn Afghanistan, maintained by Karzai's gentlemanly diplomacy and backed by the presence of a potent international military force.

The fighting that erupted on March 21, in which Ismail Khan's son was killed, is the worst factional fighting since the fall of the Taleban some two years ago.

Ismail Khan's son, Mirwais Sadiq, the country aviation minister, became the third cabinet minister in Karzai's administration to be killed. He was also the second aviation minister to die violently. The first, Abdul Rahman, was beaten to death at Kabul airport in February 2002. None of the assailants in that slaying have been brought to justice.

The fighting in Herat, which lasted less than a day, provides insight into the delicate balancing act that Karzai must perform as he establishes control of his centralised government over regional factions dominated by former mujahedin commanders such as Ismail Khan.

The fact that the fighting did not send the country backsliding into civil war, and that Karzai has retained the shaky allegiance of Ismail Khan, lends credence to the president's go-slow approach to imposing the unified control that is so badly needed in this highly factionalised country.

Karzai has been able to contain the flare-up largely because he enjoys the full support of United States policy-makers, as well as of the American military whose "shock-and-awe" tactics have so proved effective in conventional confrontations, though less so against guerrilla tactics.

Events surrounding the fighting in Herat remain unclear. The Karzai administration has refused to discuss details of the clash until an investigation is completed. But according to reports and sources in Herat, the fighting began following an assassination attempt against Ismail Khan, although the reasons for this remain unclear.

The attack prompted an armed confrontation between Ismail Khan's son and Karzai's recently appointed local military commander, Zahir Nayebzada. Sadiq was reportedly killed by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Several hours later, forces loyal to Ismail Khan launched an assault on Nayebzada's military headquarters. Although the number of those killed in the assault was much lower than the 100 initially reported, the headquarters building was destroyed and more than 100 of Nayebzada's troops were arrested. Fighting continued through the night, though by the next morning the city was quiet.

Herat residents then took to the streets in support of their governor, chanting "Long live Ismail Khan!" as

well as anti-foreigner slogans such as "Tourists go home!"

In the afternoon of March 22, as foreigners were being evacuated, about 1,000 soldiers from Karzai's newly-created military force, the Afghan National Army, arrived. The only other troops in the region are about 100 American soldiers assigned to a Provincial Reconstruction Team, PRT, protecting foreign aid organisations working in the region.

By the following day, Karzai had dispatched two key officials to Herat, defence minister Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim and interior minister Mohammad Ali Jalali, ostensibly to attend Sadiq's funeral, but also to investigate the confrontation and appeal for calm.

Reportedly at issue are millions of dollars in customs revenues which Ismail Khan has refused to hand over to the central government. Many suggest this money funds not only his government, but also his private army, which includes 15,000 soldiers, heavy artillery, and armour.

Herat is located on the country's western border with Iran and is a major trading city. Customs revenues are critical to the faltering Afghan economy and vital to the financing of Karzai's administration.

An Islamic hard-liner, Ismail Khan enjoys widespread support in Herat, which he controls tightly and runs fairly smoothly. City services are available, the roads are paved, and the city is being rebuilt more quickly than in the capital Kabul.

A celebrated leader of the mujahedin during the Soviet resistance, Ismail Khan was arrested and jailed by the Taliban when they overran Herat. He escaped to Iran, but returned to join the Northern Alliance and helped rout the Taliban.

Karzai named Ismail Khan as governor of Herat province as he cobbled together a government, appeasing such powerful commanders by granting them regional authority.

By appointing his son as aviation minister, Karzai gave Ismail Khan a personal representative and influence in Kabul.

Not only are Karzai and Ismail Khan physically located on opposite sides of the country, they are also far apart when it comes to their acceptance of western values. Ismail Khan reportedly maintains a religious police force which harasses local shopkeepers who sell western music and films, which they consider a corrupting influence.

There have also been reports of women walking on public streets with their boyfriends being stopped, arrested and taken to hospitals to have their virginity checked. Public celebrations of weddings have been banned. There is believed to be a high rate of suicide among women in the region.

So far, Karzai has played down the clash and refused to comment on the incident. "It is not a complete surprise, though it is extremely unfortunate," said his spokesman, Jawad Ludin. "There will always be setbacks," he said.

Ludin insisted that central government troops were sent to Herat only to establish security. "Our top priority is to ensure the peace and security of the people is not threatened," he said.

But the fighting unleashed a wave of speculation. Did Nayeبزادا act alone, or with the knowledge and consent of Karzai's government?

Provoking a war with Ismail Khan would seem futile, given that Karzai's new national force has only 9,000 soldiers, no match for Ismail Khan's large army of seasoned fighters.

The Karzai administration is sticking to its story that Nayeبزادا was on his own, despite initial reports that he was acting with the knowledge of the central government.

Today an uneasy calm hangs over Herat. But Ismail Khan has let it be known that there will be hell to pay unless the government brings Nayeبزادا to justice.

At the same time, he says he does not blame Kabul for the incident. "This was only Nayeبزادا," his spokesman said. "We don't know why he did this."

For the moment, Ismail Khan remains aligned with Karzai.

But some things have changed following the incident. More than 1,000 soldiers from Karzai's new national army are now in Herat, ensuring for the first time a military presence for Karzai and his government in this important city.

The clash may also give the president additional leverage when he seeks the continued support of the United States. The assault came just days after a visit to Kabul by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who promised Washington would remain steadfast in providing financial and military aid to the Karzai administration.

And the dangerous flare-up could also help Karzai make his case at a international donors' meeting in Berlin scheduled for later this month, where he is expected to ask those nations which have already pledged 30 billion US dollars in aid over the next 15 years to start making good on their promises.

For the moment, Ismail Khan's power appears to be diminished. He has lost a son, his personal representative in the cabinet, and he must now share his military authority with forces from the central government.

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