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Written in Ice? Protests after the public execution of a woman in Parwan

By Obaid Ali

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There have been fresh demonstrations condemning the public execution of a young woman, Najiba, in a Taleban-controlled village in a province just to the north of Kabul - in June. The video of the execution, which was shown across the world, alerted many to how near the capital Taleban 'rule' extended. However, the target of the protesters' anger was not just the Taleban; they accused the government of failing to protect women, generally, and said Najiba's case was just one of twelve in that province - in both Taleban and government-controlled areas.(1) AAN researcher, Obaid Ali, has been looking into the Najiba case – uncovering the murky details of how she came to be killed, how her death has given women's rights activists a platform to try to open up wider debate and how the killing might lead to possible political fall-out on the government side.

Protestors have been out on the streets again on 14 July, this time in Charikar, the capital of Parwan, the province where the killing happened. Unlike the Kabuli demonstrators on 10 July (2), they did not call for the replacement of the Parwan governor, Abdul Basir Salangi, on the grounds that he was failing to do his job properly. But then again, they were demonstrating in Salangi's backyard. However, they were, if anything, stronger in their demands. They called on the government to launch a military operation in Shinwar to eliminate the Taleban there, but also said the government must do more to protect women generally.

The organizer of the Charikar protests, the director of women's affairs in Parwan, Shajan Yazdanparast, also claimed that since the start of the Afghan new year on 20 March, dozens of

cases of violence against women have been registered with the authorities in the province, including kidnappings, executions and murders, either conducted by their families or by insurgents, the latter allegedly being involved in twelve cases of executions. One case of an 'honour killing' is described in a recent Reuters story. The protesters also condemned the killing, on 12 July, of Hanifa Safi, head of the women's affairs department of Laghman province, by a car bomb in Mehtarlam city which also injured her husband and daughter and six other civilians. (For information about the situation nationwide on violence against women, see this recent Human Rights Watch report.)

The fate of the 22 year old Najiba became headline news on 7 July after international and Afghan media aired a video clip showing her being shot dead in what we in Afghanistan call a 'desert court', handing out Taleban 'justice'. (A video clip of it is here and reports here and here.) This is not the first time a woman has been reported killed after a local 'court' found her guilty of what was seen as a crime. This has happened in both Taleban and non-Taleban areas. This time, however, the shocking video footage and the protests have raised the political tension over alleged government inaction.

The killing took place only two and a half hours drive north-west of the Afghan capital(3) on 18 June, in Kohna Deh, a part of Qolher village in Shinwar district.(4) This is a mountainous area to the south of the main road running along the Ghorband Valley which links Kabul with the west and with the north (if you want to avoid the Salang Tunnel).

The Taleban have denied involvement in the killing and called media reports blaming them as 'incorrect and cursed'. They described the killing as 'tribal justice', implying their own 'Islamic justice' is different. However, local government officials have pointed to the fact that the area in which the killing took place is ruled by Taleban. Provincial governor, Basir Salangi, told AAN that Najiba had been found in the house of a local Taleban commander who had been involved in internal clashes. Although the circumstances of the killing are still not entirely clear, a credible narrative has been given AAN by local MP, Zakia Sangin, garnered from conversations with local people.

She said Najiba had married a few years ago, but had fled her husband's house. With the support of a Taleban group commander, Azmari, she was brought to a house that belonged to his brother law and fellow Taleban commander, Mullah Qader-e 'Lang' (Qader the Lame). She was kept there for nearly three months, whether voluntarily or against her will is not entirely clear. Meanwhile, Qader-e Lang was accused by other local Taleban of killing another commander, Mulla Ezzat. On 16 June 2012 (as reported in the Hasht-e Sobh/8am newspaper), he was killed by a unit of the Afghan Local Police. On the same day, a group of Ezzat's comrades attacked Mulla Qader's house, captured him, brought him to the place where Mulla Ezzat had been killed and shot him dead. Later, they searched Qader's house and, while Azmari managed to escape, they found both Najiba and Mulla Qader's wife. Najiba was accused of fleeing her husband's house and Mulla Qader's wife accused of sheltering her. Sangin told AAN that the Taleban returned Najiba to her family and it was her husband who submitted his wife's case to the Taleban shadow district governor, Mirza Muhammad for judgment. According to Sangin, he issued a decree for the public execution of both women. Najiba was killed and it could well be that it was her husband who shot her. Qader-e Lang's wife was spared, temporarily, because she

was pregnant. She managed to escape and reach security forces in Parwan centre. She is now in a women's shelter. (On the debate about the shelters, see our earlier blog here.)

Governor Salangi, for one, has been trying to answer the protestors' accusation that he is not up to his job. In doing so, however, he has raised yet more questions about the Taleban presence in Shinwar and the government's actions.

Salangi told AAN that, since he was appointed two years ago, he has undertaken serious efforts to protect residents and safeguard women's rights. He also said he had repeatedly asked central government to launch military operations in Shinwar and Seyagerd districts in order to eliminate the armed opposition there (see AAN previous blog on Ghorband security here). This claim contradicts his statements in February 2012 in which he called Parwan 'the backbone of security' in Afghanistan and as being almost Taleban-free. Salangi said that, in the last two years, only two operations had taken place. The second, in June this year, was launched after several attacks were reported in April and May and cleaned the main road through Ghorband Valley of Taleban, establishing police checkpoints along it. However, the security forces were not been able to claim the mountainous areas.

In an interview with the Kabul-based Bokhdi news agency, Salangi also accused the MP, Abdul Sattar Khawasi, of blocking military operations in Shinwar district. The background to this accusation is that Khawasi belongs to the registered political wing of Hezb-e Islami, and Hezb fighters (of its insurgent wing) are also known to operate in Ghorband.⁽⁵⁾ The old Hezb/Jamiat rivalry (Salangi is a former Jamiat-e Islami commander) may have been part of the reason for government inaction in Parwan. Or Salangi may just be trying to pass the buck for responsibility for security in his province onto the shoulders of a locally prominent Hezb.

Ghorband is a traditional Hezb-e Islami stronghold. During the civil war, Hezb was always more committed to holding Ghorband even at a high military cost, than almost in any place in the country.

Be that as it may, with protestors showing no sign of letting up pressure on the government over its alleged failure to protect women, there may well be more calls for military action in the areas of Parwan not under state control. That would still leave the question of how activists can get the government to take the protection of women seriously in the areas that are under its control. In Tokyo, the government pledged to demonstrate, 'implementation, with civil society engagement, of both the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (EVAW), including through services to victims as well as law enforcement, and the implementation of the National Action Plan for Women (NAPWA) on an annual basis'. However, as the Dari saying goes, the pledge at Tokyo this may have been *dar yakh nawishta kardan wa dar aftarab gasashtan* - written in ice and then put in the sun.

(1) Shajan Yazdanparast said that Tolo, though, had incorrectly reported that 12 women had been executed by the Taleban and seventy other cases of violence had been registered in Shinwar alone, since Nawruz. She said the figures were for Parwan province and in both government and non-government-controlled areas.

(2) The Kabul protest was the second time members of Afghanistan's younger generation, along with rights and civil society activists, have staged protests in Kabul over a brutal action by the Taleban. On 28 June, there was a commemoration of those killed in the Taliban attack on the Qargha that killed and injured dozens of people (see a previous AAN blog on this here). Both protests were organised via Facebook (it was called 'March against brutal killing of Najiba in Parwan'). The group says it is committed to continue its peaceful protest against civilian casualties that are carried by any armed group, whether state or non-state.

(3) We estimate one and a half hours to the main Ghorband Valley road and a further hour along the much shorter dirt track to the village itself.

(4) Some reports (for example, here) said the execution took place in Qimchok 'village' but this is a valley in Seyagerd district, not in Shinwar.

(5) During the civil war, Hezb clung on here, despite being surrounded by Jamiat from Parwan and Panjshir to the east, Hezb-e Wahdat blocking their route out to the south and West through Jalrez and Wardak, and Sayed-e Kayyan (MP Sayed Mansur Naderi), the Ismaili militia commander, cutting routes north to Baghlan during civil war.