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Why Now, Afghanistan?

Why would Kabul announce the death of Mullah Omar at such a critical point in the peace process?

By Michael Kugelman

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In the aftermath of Wednesday's revelation that Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar is dead — which had long been assumed yet never confirmed — a fundamental question remains.

Why would the Afghan government make this announcement now?

Specifically, why would Kabul jeopardize a peace process that it desperately wants to succeed and that has only recently gained steam?

Surely, Kabul knew that announcing Mullah Omar's death would bring long-festering tensions within the Taliban to the fore and trigger a deep and perhaps even existential organizational crisis — a messy, drawn-out, and possibly bloody leadership transition that will consume the Taliban's energies and could limit its ability to focus on peace talks.

So what is going on?

One might reasonably conclude that a spoiler wanted to sabotage the peace process by getting the word out about Mullah Omar's death. There is no shortage of possible candidates — Pakistani intelligence officials who prefer continuous war in Afghanistan to ensure a limited Indian footprint in the country; rivals of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who opposes a reconciliation process that entails Pakistan playing a leading role; or hard-line, anti-peace Afghan Taliban figures, who prefer to stay on the battlefield, where great gains have been made as of late.

The problem with this idea is that no one in Pakistan, no Afghan opposition figure, and no Taliban member made the announcement of Mullah Omar's death. It was the entity that *least* wants the peace process to be sabotaged — the Afghan government — that broke the news. Perhaps the best attempt at conspiratorial conjecture is this: The Pakistanis, who reportedly were the ones that passed on the information of Mullah Omar's death, sought to scuttle the talks and capitalized on their improved relations with Kabul to share the news and encourage the Afghans to broadcast it to the world.

However, even assuming the possibility that a Pakistani spoiler — or any spoiler — presented this information to the Afghan government, Kabul would presumably have sat on it and not rushed to reveal it at such a delicate moment in the peace process. Furthermore, Pakistani efforts to undercut the peace process in this way would also undercut Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the Taliban's longtime second in command, who is close to the Pakistanis and supports the peace process.

Other possible explanations — though none very convincing — come to mind: The Afghan government had good reason to believe the talks would somehow take a turn for the worse and decided to provide an out for the negotiating parties; in fact, the talks were enjoying unprecedented momentum. Or in a similar vein, some trusted anti-peace stakeholder with leverage over Kabul pressured the Afghans to slow down reconciliation; in reality, Afghanistan's most trusted interlocutors — the Americans, the Chinese, the broader international donor community, and, albeit more grudgingly, the Indians — all support reconciliation. Alternately, perhaps Kabul reckoned that announcing Mullah Omar's death would unite the Taliban — much like the death of a revered family patriarch brings all sparring factions to the funeral; in truth, Mullah Omar's death will likely have a divisive effect.

Setting aside the question of when and how Kabul received the information about Mullah Omar's death (incidentally, Afghan officials suggested last year that Mullah Omar could be

dead), this much is clear: Kabul genuinely seems to believe that making the announcement now will benefit the peace process. “The government of Afghanistan believes that grounds for the Afghan peace talks are more paved now than before,” declared a presidential statement on Wednesday, “and thus calls on all armed opposition groups to seize the opportunity and join the peace process.”

At first glance, this judgment appears dead wrong. The second round of peace talks — scheduled for Friday — has been postponed at the Taliban’s request. And at any rate, the Taliban will surely be too distracted to focus on negotiations anytime soon, especially because the confirmation of Mullah Omar’s death will intensify a growing rivalry between Mansour, the Taliban’s second in command, and Muhammad Yaqoob, Mullah Omar’s eldest son.

Earlier this week, Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai wrote about a recently launched “rebellion by certain important military commanders” against Mansour’s authority. This new movement revolves around Yaqoob, who according to Yusufzai “is said to be ready to take over the Taliban leadership in case the death of his father is confirmed.” In essence, the battle can now begin. The opening salvos have already been fired; early Thursday morning, reports emerged from the Pakistani press that the Taliban’s leadership council has appointed Mansour as Mullah Omar’s successor.

Kabul, however, likely takes a different view of the peace talks’ future trajectory. It may believe that by announcing Mullah Omar’s death, it has plunged the Taliban into crisis and thereby weakened the organization — and deprived it of some of the leverage it derived from its strong showing on the battlefield. Perhaps Kabul’s message to the Taliban is this: You are leaderless and in disarray. Why not give up the fight and talk with us, so that we can work out an arrangement to integrate you back into the political system.

There is some logic to this view, particularly if one also takes into account the growing threat that pro-Islamic State fighters — who have defected from the Taliban in part because of unhappiness about an absentee supreme leader — have posed to the Afghan Taliban in recent months. In Nangarhar province, these fighters are battling forces loyal to the Taliban. Mullah Omar’s death announcement will likely spark a fresh exodus of disaffected Taliban fighters to the Islamic State’s side.

However, this all vastly overstates the Taliban’s willingness to throw in the towel and its ability to think and act as a unified entity. It also understates the Taliban’s continued strength on the battlefield, even in the face of the Islamic State’s challenge.

Ultimately, Kabul’s decision to go public with Mullah Omar’s death may amount to a leap of faith — a Pollyannaish hunch that the Taliban will now close the book on Mullah Omar and enter into a new era of reconciliation.

Kabul may be taking desperate measures. But then again, these are desperate times for a fragile unity government aching to achieve a peace that cannot be obtained on the battlefield — and as an exceedingly war-weary nation looks on nervously and grows ever more restless.

