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The Economist

The troubling dynamics of insurgency

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Kandahar will be the biggest test of NATO's new strategy to combat the Taliban

KANDAHAR - AHMED WALI KARZAI sighs wearily as he recounts the latest bit of bad news. "They just shot another elder from Arghandab. Haji Daoud or someone. It's just a poor guy, an elder who has nothing to do with the government."



Barely a day goes by in which Ahmed Wali, half-brother to President Hamid Karzai and a sort of viceroy to the turbulent, Taliban-filled south, is not briefed about another killing. As America and its allies gear up for their big fight of the summer—to extend control

over the southern province of Kandahar, which they call the cornerstone of the counterinsurgency campaign—the Taliban have been on a killing spree. Officials, Afghans working for foreign-aid organisations and tribal elders are all targets.

The deputy mayor of Kandahar was murdered while he prayed in a mosque. Workers for NGOs have fled well-paid jobs after death threats. Last week the United Nations told its local staff to stay home and evacuated its few international staff. Threats and assassinations have been going on for years, but the spate of killings and the liberal use of bombs have spread fear, even panic, through the city.

General David Petraeus, head of US Central Command, has warned that “horrific actions” by the Taliban will meet the attempt by American, Afghan and Canadian forces to wrest control of the province. Still, commanders are happy to talk about their plans for Kandahar, as they were in February before a well-publicised assault on Marja, a small farming community in Helmand. They say that unlike in Marja the offensive will not come in a single blow. There will be fighting in some areas, particularly the districts of Panjwayi and Zhari, where conflict has been sporadic for years. But elsewhere NATO will gradually step up operations, quietly increasing the number of soldiers and (they hope) improving the quality of local government. Military activities within the city, which tend to attract trouble, will be kept to a minimum.

Such tactics are part of the strategy outlined last year by General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of allied forces. They are intended both to reassure the population and to encourage insurgents not to fight.

So far, though, the evidence suggests they are having the opposite effect in Kandahar. With reports of civilian casualties in Marja ringing in their ears, Kandaharis strongly oppose the coming operation—something tribal elders impressed on Hamid Karzai when he visited their city last month. Some fear that fighting in the surrounding countryside will push insurgents into Kandahar city, traditionally a sanctuary. Moreover, people living in outlying urban areas say the Taliban, far from being repelled by the prospect of an allied surge, are massing as never before. Faiz Mohamad, a shopkeeper in Zhari, says hundreds of teenage Taliban have arrived in his native village from Pakistan.

No doubt many of those fresh-faced fighters will be killed or forced to flee in the next few months. But that, as NATO officials say, is the easy bit. Long-term security will not be achieved unless Kandahar’s politics can be improved.

That means dealing with a tight-knit group of leaders who since 2001 have managed to monopolise political power and the lucrative “war economy”, which is based on foreign military contracts for construction, logistics and private security. Ahmed Wali is usually regarded as the archetypal beneficiary, though he denies he has profited from any military contracts.

Nonetheless, his dominance and that of his Popolzai tribe has created grievances among both ordinary people and other tribal leaders, particularly the Ghilzai. According to Carl

Forsberg, an American expert on Kandahar's politics, "many of the local power brokers who are excluded from Wali Karzai's network see the Taliban insurgency as the only viable means of political opposition."

A few months ago NATO generals said that a big offensive in Kandahar was pointless as long as Ahmed Wali remained in power. But Ahmed Wali enjoys strong support from his brother in Kabul and the Americans seem to have lost their appetite for getting rid of him, perhaps on the grounds that this is the devil they know.

Instead, they hope Afghans will "shura their way to success", in the words of Lieutenant-General Nick Parker, General McChrystal's deputy. The plan is that by establishing lots of consultative gatherings, or shuras, those who feel excluded will be brought into the decision-making. Assuming, of course, they will want to take part in something that seems likely to attract the bullet or the bomb of a Taliban assassin.