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Karzai trapped in no-man's land

By M K Bhadrakumar
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Afghan President Hamid Karzai has made his first political move a week after the assassination of the head of the Afghan High Peace Council and former president, Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Following a meeting in Kabul that included tribal elders, legislative chairmen, cabinet ministers, former mujahideen commanders and his two vice presidents, Karzai's office issued a statement on Wednesday admitting that a question mark should be on the Taliban's capacity to take independent decisions, implying they were merely a Pakistani proxy.

The statement suggested that Karzai no more regards the Taliban as his errant "brothers", which used to be his preferred epithet to describe the insurgents. "During our three-year efforts for peace, the Taliban has martyred our religious *ulema*, tribal elders, women, children, old and young. By killing Rabbani, they showed they are not able to take decisions. Now, the question is [whether we should seek] peace with whom, which people?"

Karzai's retraction

It is a belated confession by Karzai, necessitated by the force of circumstances, as he gropes for a way forward. Conceivably, it need not be taken as the final word. Karzai is grandstanding. Rabbani's departure has left Karzai stranded in a no-man's land where he stands all by himself - derided by the Taliban, disowned by the United States and despised by the many fuming

detractors within the erstwhile Northern Alliance (NA) groups whom he sidelined and kept out of office.

Karzai has been one of the first and consistent advocates of peace talks with the Taliban. His speech at the London conference in January 2010 bears eloquent testimony to Karzai's deep-rooted conviction that Taliban are a part of the Afghan nation and should be allowed to participate in mainstream Afghan life. Many countries were not convinced that was the case but still went along since it was Karzai's Afghan initiative (backed robustly, of course by Richard Holbrooke, the late US special representative for AfPak).

By Karzai's own admission, Rabbani's assassination puts a question mark on his power of judgment. Which is an unfair self-indictment because he was fundamentally right in his judgment that the war was not getting anywhere and only through a political settlement with the Taliban can it be brought to an end.

His *bete noir*, Abdullah Abdullah, the former Afghan foreign minister and presidential candidate, has seized the moment and was in an incendiary mood this week. He said Taliban have "not demonstrated even one sign of interest in seriously coming to the table to discuss a political settlement ... They think that using this strategy will allow them to gain power in Afghanistan."

Abdullah is riding the wave of indignation among Rabbani's followers. He knows it makes good politics to do some more Karzai-bashing when Washington is listening: "Day by day, the government is losing people's support and trust. Government bodies like the police and military have not been developed, and there is no rule of law. So, this encourages the Taliban to continue terrorist attacks and bring harm to the people of Afghanistan."

But what is the alternative that Abdullah would suggest? Karzai had sensed all along that there was widespread opposition to his peace plan among the non-Pashtun groups belonging to the erstwhile Northern Alliance, which Abdullah was tapping into for mounting a political challenge to his presidency. Karzai was wary about Abdullah's channels to influential quarters in Washington.

Karzai's trump cards were two. One, he had Rabbani with him. Karzai counted on him as a political bridge to the non-Pashtun constituencies as well as to the mujahideen. With Rabbani gone, he has a problem connecting with the anti-Taliban constituency in Afghanistan, leave alone bringing them on board a broad-based settlement.

The president's other trump cards have been his two vice presidents, who are powerful satraps in the non-Pashtun political domain. One is Mohammed Fahim, the strongman from Panjshir who inherited Ahmed Shah Massoud's war machine and the other is Karim Khalili, leader of the Hazara Shi'ites. Both have everything to lose in a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

Karzai has also been indulging in a delicate exercise in the past few years building bridges with the Pashtun tribes and carving out a base in the southern regions. He depended heavily on the ruthless skills of his half-brother Wali Karzai on this front, but his assassination in July of Kandahar's mayor has thrown Karzai's stratagem into shambles.

If the peace process had progressed, a new political dynamic would have emerged that strengthened Karzai, but with Wali and Rabbani removed from the scene, he is forced to gravitate toward the non-Pashtun camp, although it isn't his natural constituency.

Peering into a bottomless pit

Ideally, this is a moment when the Americans should raise his comfort level. On the contrary, they are looking away and are consumed by their own problems. The latest United Nations Report on secretary general Ban Ki-Moon's desk says Afghanistan is witnessing "considerable political volatility and disconcerting levels of insecurity".

Former commander of US forces in Afghanistan David Petraeus' claims regarding the encouraging results of the US's surge seem an obfuscation of the harsh ground reality. The UN report says there has been a 40% increase in the monthly average number of "security incidents" in the first eight months of 2011 as compared to the same period last year.

More important, it says the southeastern region which was the theatre for Petraeus' surge remains the "focus of military activity" accounting for two-thirds of all violent incidents, and that even where the US handed over responsibility for security to the Afghan forces, a "resilient insurgency" is challenging the efficacy of the transition.

On top of this, the US is barely coping with Pakistan's blunt refusal to act against the Haqqani network. The standoff can turn into a confrontation any day from now if the US decides to put the Haqqanis on the list of terrorists.

Chairman of the US Senate Intelligence Committee Dianne Feinstein has written to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that on the basis of the testimony given by the outgoing chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee Mike Mullen, the Haqqani group "meets the standards for designation" as a terrorist organization. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has agreed with Mullen's testimony.

In such a scenario, logically, the US would have to consider at some stage declaring Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism, putting at risk the entire future of the "war on terror".

Put plainly, the US-Pakistan relationship is peering into a bottomless pit. Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Gilani was not far off the mark in his remark that the US's Afghan policy shows "confusion and policy disarray".

At such a juncture, where is the time or inclination for the Barack Obama administration to come to Karzai's rescue? On the other hand, Washington is resorting to blame game accusing Karzai's government for ineptitude and corruption and as responsible for all that is going wrong.

The biggest danger in Karzai's gravitation to the NA camp is that it would exacerbate ethnic polarization in Afghanistan. The strengthening of the NA hold on the power structure in Kabul at this juncture virtually forecloses any scope for reconciliation with the Taliban.

As the US drawdown accelerates through the coming months, Karzai will face the dilemma of having to depend more and more on the military muscle of the NA groups. That would be a recipe for another round of civil war.

Regional politics is bound to play a decisive role in what lies ahead. Karzai understands that Pakistan is central to any peace process with the Taliban. He already met Gilani last Thursday when the Pakistani prime minister traveled to Kabul. Gilani is expected in Kabul again in early October.

Pakistan can be expected to do all it can to kickstart another round of peace process. Its interest lies in preventing Karzai becoming a prisoner of the anti-Taliban NA groups, which is to say to prevent a return of the NA's dominance of the Kabul government. But in the present political climate in Kabul, the task of finding another consensus candidate to replace Rabbani will not be easy.

Meanwhile, Karzai is heading for New Delhi next week, his first visit abroad after Rabbani's assassination. It is a scheduled visit apparently for delivering a memorial lecture in New Delhi on regional politics, but Karzai would seek India's support with the expectation that it might give him leverage vis-a-vis Pakistan in the coming period and it has a degree of influence with the NA groups. India, however, would prefer to stand on the sidelines and it remains wary of another civil war in Afghanistan.

India's warnings of the shape of things to come are indeed coming true but this is hardly the moment for self-gratification. Delhi is exasperated with the inconsistencies and disarray in the US's policies. The aggravation of the US-Pakistan rift may appear to work to India's advantage but on the contrary, there is a sense of disquiet in Delhi over the talk of possible military strikes against Pakistan.

The point is, the result of any such US incursions into Pakistan cannot be far different from what happened in Cambodia following the US invasion in April 1970 - namely, a radicalization of the entire region. Just as the Cambodian incursion couldn't salvage the Vietnam War, in the present case, too, staving off defeat in Afghanistan is going to be very difficult for the US.

All the same, Indian commentators have almost in unison pointed out that Rabbani's assassination shows there has been hardly any change in the Taliban's mindset, which militates against the idea of any form of power sharing with other Afghan groups.

Having said that, New Delhi is also keen to build on the current atmosphere of cordiality with Pakistan and encourage Islamabad to draw a line under cross-border terrorist activities. The standoff with the US, ironically, may make Islamabad more receptive to Indian concerns. Karzai will receive renewed assurances of Indian support during his visit next week, but on balance India will not allow itself to be sucked into the Afghan endgame.

Fatal mistake

The point is, Karzai's predicament is also the manifestation of a much bigger crisis that is enveloping Afghanistan. The Afghan body polity is virtually crumbling and the US neither has the energy nor the resources and the will to fortify the Afghan state when such support is needed more than ever in the past decade.

The meltdown leading to a civil war can be rapid if the ethnic rift widens in the coming period. The signs are not good in this regard. Rabbani's assassination has torn asunder the fragile crust that was forming on the ethnic divides in the country. Karzai's dependence on the "warlords" of the NA will set the clock back in Afghan politics. Parliament is already at a standstill. There is great political uncertainty. Abdullah was echoing a widely held perception among the Afghan politicians when he said that Rabbani's is not going to be the last political assassination.

But overarching all this is the disintegration of the US's alliance with Pakistan. The US needs to grasp that it has no alternative but to concede Pakistan's legitimate interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan is not going to blink since it has high stakes on the Afghan chessboard and Washington is nobody to dictate how to frame its interests.

Any US incursion into Pakistan is sure to bring forth a furious backlash that will dwarf the Beirut Barracks Bombing in October 1983, which killed 241 American servicemen. And that will be the end of the Obama presidency. Make no mistake about it.

The only course available for the US is to rein in the irreconcilable NA elements (many of whom were foolishly propped up by the US as the "anti-thesis" to Karzai and have no standing of their own) and allow Karzai and his Pakistani interlocutors to kickstart another effort within the framework of the Afghan-Pakistan peace process.

It should allow Karzai to select his own nominee to replace Rabbani with whom he can work closely - and whom Pakistan is comfortable with. That should be the first necessary step in the coming days. A vacuum should not be allowed to develop.

Equally, there should be a change of heart on the part of the US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies; they should not interfere with the intra-Afghan peace process. Despite whatever inadequacies he may have, Karzai is still the most credible figure to lead the Kabul set up in the peace process.

Again, he deserves to be given more space to do the sort of Afghan-style networking that he is good at, and create his own coalition and establish his credibility with the Taliban. This is simply not the time to apply Western norms of politics. Simply put, there has been far too much US interference.

The US and NATO's attempt to establish a parallel track of their own has been at the root of the discord between Washington and Islamabad. If and when the veil lifts on Rabbani's

assassination, it is more than probable that his recent proximity with the US turned out to be the ultimate fatal mistake on the part of this extraordinary politician, which cost him his life.