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Reuters

After decade of war, Afghans mull Taliban return

By Martin Petty and Hamid Shalizi

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KABUL (Reuters) – Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, a former right hand man to the reclusive, one-eyed leader of the Taliban, believes there is only one way to end a decade of fighting in Afghanistan. Return the hardline Islamists to power.

Foreign troops are starting to head home anyway, he argues, and the Taliban are tough enough to keep on fighting for years.

"The only way to finish the fight against the Taliban is to bring them to power and get foreigners out," Muttawakil said in an interview at his Kabul home, perched on a mock tiger-skin sofa and dressed in a traditional white shalwar kameez baggy tunic and trousers.

Besides, he adds, corruption, insecurity and immorality have flourished since U.S.-backed troops ousted the group from Kabul, and their return would end much of that.

Other Afghans are not as enthusiastic about the reappearance in government of a group they remember as cruel and oppressive rulers. But as foreign troops start to head home with the war far from over, it is a future many are planning for.

"When the U.S. leave, in one week, the Taliban will return. I believe 100 percent they will take back power, whether the Afghan people want them or not," said Khalid Ahmad, who sells women's clothes adorned with glitter and embroidery.

"If they return, they'll reintroduce their Islamic laws, they'll do the same as they did before. If that happens, I won't leave, but I doubt I will be able to have a business like this."

During their 1996-2001 rule the Taliban implemented heavily oppressive policies, including shutting women out from most work and study and restricting their movements.

They publicly executed adulterers, brought back physical punishments including amputation, and the Pashtun-dominated movement discriminated against Afghans from other ethnic groups.

Their austere interpretation of Islam also alienated Afghans who were not affected by their harsher rules. They banned television, some sports and most music, arrested men without beards, and beat those who didn't attend prayers.

BACK BY GUN OR TREATY

The U.S. and other Western and regional powers have insisted their commitment to Afghanistan will last beyond the December 31, 2014, deadline agreed by NATO and Afghan President Hamid Karzai for getting foreign combat troops out.

Top U.S. officials including the ambassador in Kabul say months of tentative moves to talk to the Taliban about a political end to a decade-long war will progress only if the military pressure on the group is sustained or increased.

"The Taliban needs to be further weakened to the point where they will come to the table prepared to accept the conditions we have set jointly with the Afghans," Ambassador Ryan Crocker told Reuters in a recent interview.

But many Afghans see efforts to reach out to the Taliban, by both Karzai and the West, as a sign that cash and commitment for the war are waning.

Confidence in the Afghan police and army, riven by corruption, drug use and illiteracy, is not high.

So there is a growing sense that the Taliban are likely to be back, either through force or through a settlement more advantageous to the group than to departing Western powers.

"I'm worried the Taliban will return. If the foreign forces leave us halfway along this journey all the gains will be dramatically lost," said 24 year-old shop owner Abbas.

But for others weary of violence after three decades of fighting, the return of the insurgent group would be preferable to another descent into full-blown civil war.

And although foreign troops were initially welcomed as liberators across swathes of anti-Taliban Afghanistan, their presence has brought many deaths, and the billions of dollars channeled into the country funded corruption as much as change.

More than 11,000 civilians are believed to have died in the war, and thousands more were injured. Although insurgents caused about 80 percent of civilian deaths this year, the foreign forces are seen by some as the root cause of the suffering.

"The rise in immoral activities, suicide bombings, and all our misery is because of American presence in Afghanistan," said Abdul Nazir, an imam at a Kabul mosque. He agrees with Muttawakil that if they leave, the violence will end.

"I know that Taliban also kill innocent people and want to enforce strict sharia law, but they are still Muslims and better than the infidels here. The Taliban are successful because many Muslims see them as sole guardians of Islamic values."

A CHANGING TALIBAN?

The Taliban themselves have also been changed by a decade of guerilla warfare inside their country, and technological and political changes globally, though they still espouse an austere brand of Islam and want it enforced in Afghanistan.

There have been hints in statements and from former Taliban officials that they may have softened their stance on issues like education and private enterprise.

Some analysts say they are seeking to position themselves as a pan-Afghan movement capable of running a civilian government, rather than a Pashtun-dominated militant group.

Leader Mullah Omar issued a rare statement in August to mark Eid al-Fitr, Islam's most important festival, saying that Taliban rule would be an inclusive meritocracy.

"Our manifesto is that Afghanistan should have a real Islamic regime which is acceptable to all people of the country. All ethnicities will have participation in the regime and portfolios will be dispensed on the basis of merits," an English translation of his speech provided by the group said.

The Taliban would boost the country's mining and energy sectors, he continued, to free Afghans from the "tentacles of poverty, unemployment, backwardness and ignorance."

And although attacks on schools continue in the provinces, Karzai's education minister suggested this year the Taliban may no longer seek to bar girls from studying.

Skeptics caution however that political positioning can be very different from real change, and the Taliban if they do grab or negotiate a stake in Afghanistan's government may want to rule their country in a way little changed from 2001.

"With their mentality and ideology, it would be very difficult for them to accept others and also, for others to accept them," said Ghulam Jelani Zwak, director of the Afghan Analytical and Advisory Center in Kabul.

"We have a long, long way to go before this could happen