

Alliance

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By Ahmed Rashid / Lahore

The Northern Alliance force that routed the Taliban regime from Kabul on Tuesday has two faces, and both were on display this week in the Afghan capital: The enthusiastic liberators whose arrival sparked street celebrations also reaped some ugly reprisals, summarily arresting and executing suspected Taliban partisans.

Can the U.S.-led antiterror coalition do business with this Jekyll-and-Hyde Alliance? It appears to have no choice: The Alliance already controls half of the country, and yesterday it quickly advanced, taking control of Jalalabad in the east as Pashtun tribesmen in the south joined a growing revolt, threatening the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar. The Taliban is "in retreat virtually all over the country," Vice President Dick Cheney said in Washington.

The coalition had discouraged an Alliance takeover of Kabul, hoping first to assemble at least the beginnings of multi-ethnic regime to succeed the Taliban. But the Alliance says it had to enter Kabul to fill the political vacuum created by the Taliban's sudden withdrawal. Sensitive to international opinion, the Alliance faction that took Kabul has installed only police forces and lightly armed troops, leaving its heavy weapons outside the city. Aid workers in Kabul say the ransacking of Taliban homes was conducted by local residents, not Alliance troops.

"We have not entered to establish a government; we are on a mission to provide security to Kabul, and our forces are only security forces," Alliance Interior Minister Younis Qanuni told reporters in Kabul on Monday. "We are here to pave the way for creation of a council to serve as a true representative of the people of Afghanistan to make decisions about a transitional government."

For now, the world will have to take such assertions at face value, while looking for ways to bolster Alliance leaders willing to work with the United Nations in establishing a broad-based successor to the Taliban. The West will also try to stabilize the situation by opening humanitarian corridors to Kabul and other cities, allowing the U.N. to start delivering food and other supplies.

But all that will take time, and in the interim there's no guarantee that the Alliance will hold together. For starters, it comprises predominantly three northern ethnic groups-Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras-that are divided by deep-rooted tensions. Moreover, each ethnic group has numerous commanders and warlords who are at odds with each other. These rifts make the Alliance both fragile and volatile, especially now that the common hatred of the Taliban is no longer such a unifying issue. Indeed, according to wire reports, Alliance factions split Kabul along ethnic lines within hours of their entry, hinting at a reversion to the civil war that these same groups waged when taking over from the Soviet-installed government a decade ago.

The U.S.-led coalition may also have to stomach Alliance abuses barely distinguishable from those the Taliban has wrought. Indeed, the three Alliance commanders whose capture of the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif Friday precipitated the fall of Kabul have brutal records and are reportedly carrying out revenge killings against the remnants of the Taliban and the Pashtun ethnic group from which the Taliban arose.

Luckily for the U.S., Kabul itself has been occupied by the Alliance's Tajik faction, the most disciplined and organized of the three. Its late leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated on Sept. 9 by suspected supporters of Osama bin Laden, created the only faction in the country run by civilians rather than warlords. A popular figure, Mr. Massoud was the only Afghan commander in 22 years of war to cultivate a younger generation of educated, competent Afghans for future leadership.

The triumvirate of Tajik leaders who have replaced Mr. Massoud comprises Mr. Qanuni, who is organizing Kabul's security; the urbane, English-speaking Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah; and army chief Mohammed

Fahim. These three men have played their cards well over the past two months, going along with changing U.S. military priorities during 40 days of bombing and refraining from attacking Taliban positions until the bombing had softened them up. While insisting that they are keeping their military and political options open, they have so far cooperated with the international community.

Still, there is widespread apprehension about how the largely non-Pashtun Alliance will treat Pashtuns in the days to come, and whether anti-Taliban Pashtuns may now try to capture Kabul, sparking a reprisal of the 1992 civil war that ultimately brought the Taliban to power. Of particular concern is how the Alliance will act in the largely Pashtun south, where it is deeply hated and has little influence. Having secured its territory in the north and west, some fear, the Alliance may now overextend itself in the Taliban's tribal homeland, triggering an ethnic war in that region for the first time.

Many observers are disturbed by reports that Alliance leader Ismael Khan, conqueror of the western city of Herat, is moving toward Kandahar, where locals will resent him as an interloper-just as Herat once saw the occupying Taliban. Liberating the south from the Taliban might be better left to the Pashtuns themselves. Yesterday, royalist tribal chief Hamid Karzai liberated the province of Urozghan-home to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar-and a commander from the anti-Soviet resistance, Maulvi Younis Khalis, took over Jalalabad.

But, assuming the Alliance holds together after the Taliban falls, the antiterror coalition will have several levers for promoting stability while a new regime takes shape. The first is to assure that Afghanistan's neighbors-especially Iran, Russia and Pakistan-do not try and hijack the process of Afghan reconciliation by once again insisting that their proxies dominate a future government.

The West can also pour in humanitarian aid and establish a reconstruction fund-some suggest a opening balance of \$1 billion. Relief agencies warned of a humanitarian disaster in the making as winter looms and 3.4 million people need aid to survive. Yesterday, Afghans greeted a barge loaded with U.N. aid on the Amu Darya river, which separates Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, reopening a vital relief route closed for years by nervous Uzbek officials.

The Western powers also hope that, once the Taliban is gone, the Alliance will invite Pashtuns, the exiled King Mohammed Zahir Shah, and various Afghan emigre groups abroad to help assemble a broad-based, transitional government that excludes no ethnic or political group-except hard-line Taliban who refuse to surrender Mr. bin Laden. The U.N. Security Council unanimously endorsed a plan yesterday that calls for a two-year interim government representing all ethnic groups, with a multinational security force to protect them.

Many see the former king, exiled in Rome since being ousted in 1973 after 40 years in power, as the most promising symbol of national unity. Yesterday, the 87-year-old urged Afghans to unite and choose their own destiny now that the Taliban rulers have fled Kabul. According to the Associated Press, an aide to Zahir Shah said he intends to return to the country "when the people of Afghanistan decide."